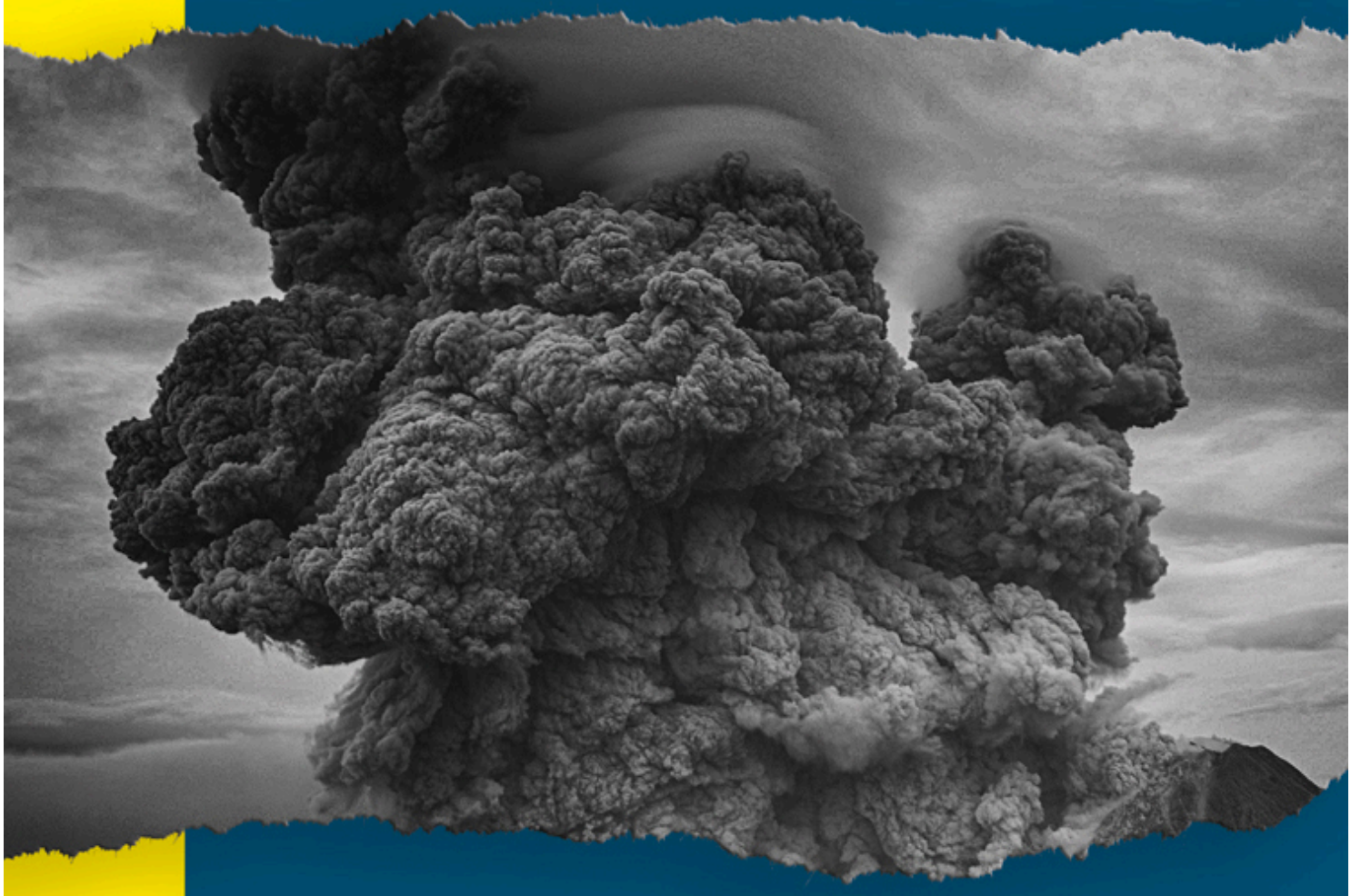
ALFRED DÖBLIN

Author of *Berlin Alexanderplatz*

MOUNTAINS OCEANS GIANTS

A Novel of the 27th Century



"...written as if under a visionary over-pressure..." GUNTER GRASS

MOUNTAINS OCEANS GIANTS

by

ALFRED DÖBLIN

Translated

by

C.D. Godwin

Galileo Publishers, Cambridge

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Contents

Translator's Introduction

Author's Dedication

Part One: The Western Continents
The new people / *Boosters* / *Anglo-Saxon Imperium* / *Rebellions* / *Milan* / *Helots, eunuchs, women* / *Melise of Bordeaux*

Part Two: The Urals War
Assault on the Machines > / *Flags* > / *No Individual was an Incendiary* > / *Wind and Water Theory* / *Light Paint* / *Synthetic Food* / *Upsets and Disturbances* / *An enemy was sought* / *War*

Parts Three & Four (abridged): Marduk
Homecoming / *Consul Marke* / *An Assembly* / *In the Trees* / *Antichrists* / *The Usurper* / *Depopulation* / *Marchers* / *Meeting with Marduk* / *To the Russian plain* / *Zimbo* / *Angela Castel* / *End of the Women* / *Marduk flees* / *Zimbo victorious*

Part Five: The Emptying of the Cities
The hot continent / *Exodus to the Yukon* / *Delegation from America* / *Ghosts and Dramas* / *1st Skit: Mansu the King* / *2nd Skit: Hubeane* / *3rd Skit: Tiger Hunt* / *Snakes* / *4th Skit: The Lion and the Jackal* / *In Brussels* / *Delvil's Notion*

Part Six: Iceland
The Plan to Melt Greenland / *Preparations for a Wedding* / *Shetland* / *Billows of Oxygen-Nitrogen* / *Iceland* / *Basalt* / *The Island Splits Apart* / *Fugitives* / *Tourmaline* / *The Continent Wanted Some*

Part Seven: Greenland
To Greenland / *Oil-clouds* / *Massif of Gneiss and Granite* / *Observation Squadron* / *Fifteen Vessels met their End* / *Under the Shroud* / *Emergent Life*

Part Eight: The Giants
Monsters come Ashore / *Delvil's new Plan* / *Tower-humans* / *Underground* / *Time of True Humanity* / *Kylin's Call* / *By the Campfire*

Part Nine: Venaska
Sweet Wilderness / *Diuva* / *Moon Goddess* / *Precipice* / *Metamorphoses* / *Lyon Burning* / *In Cornwall* / *After the Storm* / *Memorials*

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

The 27th century: beleaguered elites decide to melt the Greenland icecap. Why? – to open up a new continent, for colonisation by the unruly masses. How? – by harvesting the primordial heat of the Earth from Iceland's volcanoes. Nature fights back, and it all goes horribly wrong…

In the early 1920s confirmed city-dweller Alfred Döblin – he was 15 before he saw his first cherry tree – became puzzled by a nagging sense of Nature:

> I experienced Nature as a secret. Physics as the surface, begging for explanations. Textbooks… knew nothing of the secret. Every day I experienced Nature as the World Being, meaning: weight, colour, light, dark, its countless materials, as a cornucopia of processes that quietly mingle and criss-cross. [1]

Döblin sensed the seeds of another epic fiction: this time set in an imagined future, following two novels set in the historical past.[2] He began his new project with an episode eventually placed in Part 6: Mutumbo's fleet, excavating the ocean to provide a refuge on the seabed, the waters held at bay by dreadful technologies. It became the lead-in to a grand venture: "I would not take off to the stars, this would be an adventure on the Earth, wrestling with the Earth." And so human beings – "a kind of bacteria on Earth's skin, grown over-mighty from brains and cleverness" – head for Iceland and Greenland. By early 1922, when he had essentially completed Parts 5 to 7, he could recognise the Theme that was speaking through him: "human strength against Nature's power, the impotence of human strength."

> I keep saying "Nature". It's not the same thing as "God". It's darker, huger than God. The complete whirling secret of the world.… Now as I wrote… I found myself facing a secure, strong power that demanded expression, and my novel had a specific task: to praise the World Being.[3]

Döblin's Dedication gives voice to this urge.

Readers accustomed to following a story via Plot and Character may at first be disoriented by this epic of the future. Its structure is more symphonic than novelistic, driven by themes and motifs that emerge, fade back, emerge again in new orchestral voicings and new tempi. The prose – supple, rhythmic, harsh, elegiac, tender, unsparing – propels the reader on through scene after vivid scene. *Mountains Oceans Giants* is a literary counterpart to the painted dreams and nightmares of Hieronymus Bosch, in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* and *The Last Judgement*.

The Iceland-Greenland venture on which Döblin first unleashed his imagination is narrated with a truly extraordinary intensity: the technologies for harvesting and storing Iceland's volcanic heat, the human sacrifices the operation demands, the cosmic horror of this insult to Earth's being. Oil-clouds are developed to blanket the Greenland icecap with Iceland's heat, and the biosphere responds to Tourmaline in hideous seemingly magical ways, reviving long-extinct flora and fauna and creating ghastly new life forms. On completing the Iceland-Greenland episodes, Döblin almost suffered a nervous collapse[4].

How did humanity arrive at this point, where an overweening Promethean impetus[5] has brought calamity to humans and the Earth? The first two Parts present a broad-brush overview of the six centuries following the historical calamity of the First World War. They highlight problematic themes that in many cases have become only more salient since Döblin wrote in the 1920s: mass urbanisation, local cultures transformed by migration, gender wars and uncertain sexual identities, junk food taken to the extreme, masses sedated by drugs and entertainments, Promethean meddling with the very basis of matter, both living and mineral, power and wealth ever more concentrated, political elites as clueless as they are ruthless.

These centuries in which humanity persists on its industrial-technological track culminate in the dreadful Urals War, embarked on for frivolous reasons and abandoned in neither victory nor defeat. A lingering PTSD afflicts masses languishing demoralised and degenerating under the effects of Synthetic Food. The ruthless Marduk, dictator of the Berlin townzone, embarks on a change of direction, to the disquiet of elites in other townzones, by encouraging depopulation and a revived agrarianism.[6] More wars ensue.

Anti-Promethean 'primitive' impulses come to the surface. Shamans, ghosts, and parables played out on the stage bring home to the suffering masses how unnatural is their way of life, and stimulate them to regain agency. The back-to-the-land Settler movement intensifies, and the London elite hit on a spiffing plan to defuse the tensions: open up new land for settlement – on Greenland. Calamity follows.

The Greenland monsters unleashed by the mysterious power of the Tourmaline web bring havoc to Europe. The townzones retreat underground. A defensive line strung across land and sea from Norway to Ireland consists of Tower-humans: conglomerations of living and mineral matter activated by the power of Tourmaline into gigantic living piles, topped by a gigantified human – often a willing self-sacrifice; these intercept the monstrous flying dragons. In subterranean laboratories, techno-elites continue to meddle with living and mineral matter, to the point where they can transform themselves into any life form. Post-human Giants rampage; but some (including Delvil, initiator of the Greenland plan) decide to face down the Greenland menace; they embed themselves in the granite moors of Cornwall and Devon.

At last the survivors among the Greenland expeditionaries who make their way back to ruined Europe arrive in a

gentle bucolic Aquitaine, to which Settlers have migrated to recover their humanity through toil in the fields, and sacramental sex. Here the expeditionaries strive to come to terms with the meaning of their horrendous deeds.

While Döblin's world-building can be faulted in some respects – no IT; horses still used alongside planes and underground trains – the encompassing theme of Humanity, Technology, and Nature focuses on enduring rather than transient features of humanity's Promethean adventure. The technologies depicted in some detail all share a significant characteristic: they draw on and affect Nature in an elemental way. Fire, Earth, Water, Air and Light are constantly perverted to destructive and inhuman ends. **Fire** is harnessed in deadly weapons (e.g. the fire-mines of the Urals War), and plays a central role in the Greenland venture. **Earth** is perverted into foodstuffs, into weapons for destroying the Earth (e.g. Tourmaline webs), into a substrate for the half-mineral half-alive Tower-people. **Water** is posited by elite theorists as a template for humankind freed from individuality; and technology can make holes in the sea. **Air**, omnipresent as the wind, is weaponised as squall bombs; and underground cities must resort to an artificial atmosphere. **Light** is applied to weaponry (invisibility cloaks; deadly rays) and as a source of gruesome entertainment (Light Paint).

In the background is the sostenuto hum of two questions: can humans exercise sovereignty over Nature when they cannot control their own Promethean creations, or even themselves? And: can Meaning be found in lives lived apart from Nature? The human need for Meaning shows itself in many ways. Machine-worshippers sacrifice themselves to dynamos. Dying metal bulls keep memory of the Urals War alive. Strolling players stage fables that help despairing audiences recognise their plight. Shamans and sorcerers offer solace. Bonfires help Greenland survivors come to terms with their awful deeds.

Döblin's prose employs several distinct registers. The ground tone is provided by ***historical narrative,*** either broad-brush or in close up (e.g. Synthetic Food in Part 2). Interspersed are passages of ***poeticised encyclopaedic exposition*** – e.g. the Sahara, the fertile African landscape, the sun and the Earth's atmosphere – that place human activity in a cosmic and natural-world context, and exemplify Döblin's advocacy of a *Tatsachenphantasie* – a 'fantasy of facts'. Much of the narrative comprises heightened ***visionary prose***, presenting cinematically vivid scenes in a paragraph or two, or through many intense pages (e.g. the Urals War, the Iceland-Greenland venture). There are close-ups in ***novelistic, dramatic or folk tale*** style, e.g. Melise of Bordeaux; Holyhead and the tribal Syrians Bou Jeloud and Jedida; the subterranean erotic games of Ibis and Laponie; the sad love story of Mayelle and Servadak; the skits performed by strolling players from Africa; the folk tales involving bears. The attentive reader of even the first few pages may find examples of the different registers.

Notes on the Translation

Döblin's quirky modernistic prose is rife with deviant sentence structures. These are tricky to reproduce in English – our nouns are not capitalised, our morphology is stripped down (e.g. does 'lived' match 'gelebt' or 'lebte'?). The deviant punctuation with many comma-less lists of nouns, verbs, adjectives is retained insofar as it does not cause ambiguity. I have tried to retain some modernist flavour while not burdening the reader with excessively contorted prose, while also striving to convey the immense vigour of the original, with its cacophony of sounds, its vivid sights and restless movements.

Döblin presents the reader of what is already a challenging work with a wall of text: paragraphs often pages long (not uncommon in German literature); sections within each Part marked only by a single line break. I have adopted a more English paragraphing, and have supplied short section headings.

I have silently amended typos, misspellings and clear geographical errors (e.g. 'east' where the context requires 'west'). Where possible I have checked place names, and adopted current standard spellings. In a few cases historical names are amended to the current name (e.g. 'Oslo' not 'Christiana'). The excellent online map of Iceland at http://kortasja.lmi.is was extremely helpful in following Döblin's geography of Iceland and locating many place names.

The most difficult decision in preparing the English text was presented by Parts 3 and 4, which Döblin himself confessed had grown almost to form a separate novel.[7] Here he was attempting to resolve his still ambivalent view of humans and their place in the world – to be admired as all-powerful Prometheans, or pitied as pygmies impotent against the immensity of Nature and the Cosmos? (His next two epics *Manas* and *Berlin Alexanderplatz* would continue this attempt.) In contradiction to his strongly-expressed opposition to the Personal in fiction ("nothing but swindle and lyricism"[8]) in these two Parts he explored interpersonal and sexual relationships in the form of two triangles: Marduk-Jonathan-La Balladeuse, and Jonathan-Elina-Marduk, and sought to link the private – emotions and eroticism – on the one hand with the political and public on the other. Whatever their intrinsic merits, these lengthy explorations significantly delay the reader's arrival at the enthralling core of the epic: the Iceland-Greenland venture. I have therefore abridged Parts 3 and 4 by completely omitting two storylines totalling about 23,000 words.[9]

Untranslated until now, *Mountains Oceans Giants* (1924) has been denied a rightful place alongside its near-contemporaries in the Utopian/Dystopian SF genre: Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Stapledon's *Last and First Men* (1930), Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Wells's *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933) and E. M. Forster's astonishingly prescient *The Machine Stops* (1909), which Doblin no doubt had never read but which shares his concern for mankind's quasi-religious veneration of technological 'progress'.

With a rich and complex score that blends hard SF, soft SF, fantasy, fable, poetry and drama, Döblin's ambitious

gigantic work deserves, almost a century after its composition, to join that pantheon.

C D Godwin
Stroud, UK, February 2019

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1 AD: 'Remarks on *Mountains Oceans Giants.*' Translated from *Die neue Rundschau*, June 1924.

2 *The Three Leaps of Wang Lun* (1916; translated by C D Godwin, 2nd ed. NY Review Books 2015) set in 18th century China; and *Wallenstein* (1920) set in the Europe of the Thirty Years War; see my translation of the latter at https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com.

3 'Remarks…'

4 'A bolder editor than I might have rearranged the text thus: Part One: The Greenland Venture (= parts 6 & 7); Part Two: Prelude (= parts 1 - 5); Part Three: Aftermath (= parts 8 & 9). The reader may wish to tackle the novel in that order.

5 In his 1938 essay 'Prometheus and the Primitive', Döblin explores humanity's dual view of the world – as a resource for exploitation, or as an enduring source of mystery – through three millennia of western history. See my translation at https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com.

6 This section has been substantially abridged. See the Notes on the Translation, below.

7 Afterword to *Giganten* ('Giants'), a heavily revised and deservedly forgotten reworking published in 1932.

8 'Remarks…'

9 The deletions, marked [1], [2], etc. have been posted in full at www.galileopublishing.co.uk and https://beyond-alexanderplatz.com.

AUTHOR'S DEDICATION

What am I doing when I speak of you? I have a feeling I should not utter a single word about you, not even think of you too clearly. I call you "you" as if you were a creature, animal plant stone like me. Then I see my helplessness, and that every word is in vain. I dare not step closer to you, you monsters, you monster, that have borne me into the world, there where I am and how I am. I am just a scrap floating on water. You Thousand-named Nameless, you lift me, move me, carry me, grind me.

I have written much already. I have merely tiptoed round you. In fear I distanced myself from you. In my humility before you there sat a fear of paralysis and stupefaction. I have always, I confess, kept you as something dreadful in a dark corner of my heart. I hid you there, kept the door shut.

Now I speak – I will not say "of you" – of him: of the Thousandfoot Thousandarm Thousandhead. Of that which is the gusting wind. What burns in fire, tonguing hot blue white red. What is cold and hot, thunders, piles up clouds, pours water down, creeps magnetically here and there. What gathers itself in an animal, turns its slit eyes right and left onto a deer, makes it jump and snap, open and shut its jaws. Of that which makes the deer afraid. Of its blood that flows, that the other animal drinks. Of the Thousandbeing that dwells in matter stones gases smoke. Ever anew the pattering blending blowing away.

Changes, changes every minute. Here where I write, on paper, ink flowing, in the daylight that falls onto white crackling paper. How the paper curls, creases under my pen. How the pen bends, straightens. My guiding hand wanders left to right, back to left from the end of a line. I feel the pen against my finger: that's nerves, washed by blood. Blood flows through the finger, all the fingers, through the hand, both hands, arm, chest, the whole body, its skin muscles entrails, in every surface corner niche. So many changes in this one here. And I am just one thing, a tiny piece of space. On my desk the white cloth, three yellow tulips shrivelling. Every leaf incalculably rich. Next to them green leaves of whitethorn hawthorn. Down on the lawn pansies forget-me-nots violets. It is May. I have not counted the flowers trees grasses in the beds. Something is happening every second in every leaf stalk root.

The Thousandnamed is at work there. There it is.

Song of thrushes, rattle squeal of tramlines: There it is.

Silence, filled with movement that I do not hear but yet know is happening: there it is. The Thousandnamed. Ceaselessly curling turning climbing falling twining.

I walk on soft springy ground at the flat end of the Schlachtensee. Over there, tables chairs of the old Fischerhütte restaurant. Mist on the water and the reeds. I walk on the air's ground. Enclosed in this moment with a myriad things in this corner of the world. We together are the world: soft ground reeds the lake chairs tables in the Fischerhütte, carp in the water, flies above it, birds in the gardens of the villas of Zehlendorf, cuckoo-calls grass sand sunlight clouds anglers fishing-rods lines hooks bait children singing warmth electrical tension in the air. How dazzling the sun as it rampages up there. Who is it. What masses of stars rampage around it, I can't see them.

Dark rolling rampaging forces. You darkly raging tangled, you soft delightful almost unthinkably lovely hardly bearable heavy never-resting forces. Quivering grasping fluttering Thousandfoot Thousandspirit Thousandhead.

What do you want with me. What am I in you. I must speak of you what I feel. For who knows how long I have to live.

I do not want to go from this life before I have given voice to that which – often with terror, now in calm, and harkening – I sense with such foreboding.

A.D.
Berlin 1924

PART ONE:
THE WESTERN CONTINENTS

THE NEW PEOPLE

NONE WERE STILL living of those who came through the war they called the World War. Laid in their graves, the young men who returned from the fighting, took over the dwellings the dead left behind, drove cars, worked in offices, made the most of victory, survived defeat. Laid in their graves, the young women who strolled bright-eyed down the street as if a war between men in Europe had never been. Laid in their graves, the children of these men and women who grew up, added to the houses they inherited, peopled the factories the dead had built and left standing.

Generation after generation was laid low as if by a slowly toppling wall. They kept to dark lairs that the elements afforded. Behind them new generations were already arising, flooding from open sluices across the abandoned world.

Always there were bright young women. Young men with sleek backswept hair, lively eyes, bold lips and cheeks ready for a smile. Along the avenues old women with canes and an absent gaze, and tiny things in white linen wiggling wrinkled fingers before a pink blinking face. Moving across the sky, the silent dazzling oven that appeared each morning and sank away at night. The Earth revolved through day and night. Carried with it continents oceans mountains rivers; each year brought one more summer winter. It thrust up forests; they collapsed in ruin; new ones arose. For a day or two it wafted butterflies along. Fishes land-animals birds ants beetles snails lived and died.

The people of the western races left to their successors iron, their machines, electricity, invisible rays of powerful effect. They had the measure of countless natural forces, devices of enormous power. When the new people entered into life they rejoiced at the task ahead of them. That their path was already laid out was all the same to them; they would not be diverted from this path. The machines, those devices for which the most brilliant the wealthiest seats of learning had been founded, sidelining other sciences and rendering them banal, frivolous and threadbare, grew from century to century and then from decade to decade into suction pumps of ever more intensive power.

When the devices and facilities stood fizzing with potential, people had an urge to send them out across the world. The inventions were magical beings slipping from their hands as they hauled them along. People felt it was their own will that flew away.

Around Europe and America lay countries that must be shown the power of the devices, as a beaming lover parades his tender sweetheart down the street. Every admiring glance strikes delight in his heart; he goes at her side, holds her arm, she glances shyly at him, looks proudly this way, that way. They poured into the eastern and southern continents. Winds of the air flowed around the globe, streamed from colder to warmer climes, rose and sank. Quitting the torrid zone they blew north and south; the Earth's spin dragged them askew. Mighty the currents of the oceans, thrusting through smooth waters. Coastal seas were striped by broad regular furrows parallel to the coastline; waves set themselves hugely in motion, surged ceaselessly out of the distance all on the same course; they crashed against the shore.

No one specified how the devices of these people should be put to use. Flying people darted through cold air and warm, regardless whether it flowed east or west, or in the doldrums rose slowly up from tropical ground. Oil-tankers submarines swept churned through every body of water, like a scalpel in a surgeon's hand cutting around across an organ. They poured into the spacious landscapes of mountain and plain, hot and cold regions, that they called Asia. Nomadic fur-clad Voguls Ostiaks Yakuts Tungus drew back from them in shock and scorn. The yellow races, Chinese Japanese, offered no defence but accepted the devices from their hands.

The pallid iron-driven men and women turned their gaze to Africa, age-old continent still lost in dreams. Ships of the white races sped like missiles from the north across the blue-green surface of the Mediterranean. People flew light as air over coastal mountains. The sprawling earth-giant spread itself through seventy degrees of latitude.

Along the Mediterranean lay the remains of little Arab settlements, still occupied by bandits degenerates the untamed, sanctuaries for northern criminals, centres of resistance to globe-spanning society and its suffocating security; freeloaders too, sniffing out like policemen and judges the vulnerabilities of society, the better to exploit them. They flicked their tongues like vipers. From wretched burrows in Great Syrtis, from Tarabulus Lebda Misrata, as ruined as any ancient city of Babylon or Egypt, there emerged countless men and women, who over many decades goaded and tormented the European bull. Overhead white men and women whizzed in little flying machines, across the coastal ranges into the great hot desert.

The desert, mighty being, extended over fifteen degrees of latitude hidden behind mountain chains from Morocco to Tunis, from Mauretania and the trade routes of brown Tuareg to the ancient Berber grazing grounds of Aulad, Soliman. It stretched grey and white, rose from coastal terraces as plains high plateaus dunes beneath a sun that lay on it almost touching. It elided from gravel plain to stony desert. Winds tore at naked glowing hills, flying sand abraded crags splintered worn down by the heat. Whirlwinds worked like whetstones. Slowly the age-old mountains of the Earth decayed. Black hills and cliffs rose out of sand flying yellow white. Skirting the stony plateaus of Hamada al-Hamra lay the rubble fields, crumbling sintering, of Sarir all gnawed away. Chalk became exposed, on its back black scoured sandstone; everything ground down to sand for dunes. Tibesti, wild mountains, covering two degrees of latitude in the south; dark-coloured massifs piled massively on one another, bald and naked. Blue green white chalk trickled puffed from vertical rockwalls under the sucking fire-breath. Huge slabs sheered slid slowly down from skeletal mountains, hills were levelled, slumped to a stony plain with tottering pillars and columns. Six hundred kilometres of nothing east to west, the stony land Hamada al-Hamra; the ground gave itself to wind and sun alone, fine sand blew over it. The land

rippled south for two hundred dead kilometres. Waterless plains away to the southeast: this was Fezzan. In the bare limestone plain amid the black peaks of Tibesti dwelt the Teda. Lived with the furious wind that spun in whorls over the stony pavement of their land, grey-yellow sand-devils that swept across the plain. Thorny tamarisk bushes grew from the desiccated ground, sayal-acacias with broad crowns.

Rarely did turbid water ooze to the surface, to thistles thorn-bushes esparto-grass. Date palms in scattered sparse groves; the slender graceful plant-creature hung its thirsty roots deep in the damp layers of the ground, flourished its bushy crown atop the tall trunk.

The desert-dwelling Teda had slim dainty bodies, their skin dark yellow, flat drooping nose, thick lips, false furtive gaze not steady like the gaze of forest pygmies. In their dark tunics, dark veil over mouth and nose, little leather charm-pouches on turban throat arms, they trekked with their camels from waterhole to waterhole. Their diet camel-milk and dates, which wore their teeth to brown stumps. The soles of their feet so horny they could run over gravel and hot schist. Bleached camel-bones they found they pulverised, mixed the powder with blood from one of their beasts to make a paste; filled their bellies with it. Leather rings on their knives they macerated with stones, boiled them sliced them, filled their bellies. At night the sand-wind fell silent. When glittering lights came on in the clear deep dark sky, great moon-globe swinging high in the silvery ether, they rose mutely out of the rock-shadows murmuring a fatifa, wandered mutely on, unveiled. Tuareg in the expanses of the western desert lived like them, thin suspicious people with short two-pronged javelins and spears.

Above the waves and mountain ranges of the desert, restless white aviators appeared. They abducted frightened youngsters from nomad campsites, deposited them hours later near the panicked tribe. The Teda let them spend the night with them. But when the moon flooded the landscape with its white light, bronze-skinned men crept in shadows to the tents of the strangers, silently lifted the flaps, hurled spears. These flew barely a hand's breadth into the darkness. To the dismay of the cowering Teda the iron points seemed to hit a wall; the long quivering shafts fell back. When nothing stirred within where the men were sleeping, stealthy crouching nomads crept from all around to the strangers' tents, in their hands the revolvers they had been given in exchange for a red tarboush, indigo Sudanese tunic and leggings, indigo veil for mouth and nose. The closer they came to the strangers, the heavier the guns felt in their fingers. They had to urge the revolvers on, they seemed afraid to approach their former owners. But when the cocked hammer snapped and powder cracked, the exploding gases made it only a little way down the barrel, the bullet was forced back, the barrel burst with a roar and shattered the attacker's hands. The strangers rose calmly from their cots. They adjusted more tightly around their chests the little leather pouches containing the metal-repellent charge, bandaged the wounded, spoke to the attackers now grovelling in the sand at their feet, and to those lying motionless in ambush in the black shadows of tamarisks.

The alien aviators descended on bands trekking with their camels from one drying waterhole to the next, installed gushing hosepipes among them. Now unrest impatience came over the tribes from Great Syrtis to Lake Chad. More and more men and their graceful women turned longing eyes to the white fliers, disappeared with them. Elders sat in their campsites, in the date groves, felt anger hatred grief impotence. Tribes in the southern Tibesti mountains abandoned their crops, fled into the desert when Whites appeared, slashed open the hosepipes the Whites dropped on them, went filled with hate. There was no halting this disintegration in the face of Europe's temptations. Fezzan, the Hamada of Murzuq, the stony plateau in the western desert were emptied of the lean brown people the desert had engendered. They sailed through the air, served white masters who were servants of a mysterious dauntless wisdom, a magical being that had settled in their cold wet region. Grave sons of the desert were deposited in the warm coastal landscapes of the Mediterranean: Sicily, southern Italy, the Balkans, Spain. Many fled, longing for freedom, went to pieces unable to love the old ways or accept the new, despised by the intermingled remnants of their tribes.

From the coastal terraces the Great Desert stretched away unmoved, silent, with its stony levels gravel-fields dunes and high plateaux, its natron lakes green oases all the way across the hot continent to Lake Chad where elephants drank, where antelopes leapt, pelicans flew.

The peoples of Sudan were caught up, Wanga Ashanti Sokoto Fulani and those of the Congo, Manyema Urua, and southward in Tanganyika. This time they handed out no bright fabrics glass beads, but took away ivory, rubber. The tribes did not blend together when men and women from the north appeared among them. For the longest time there were still Bushmen Aka Pygmies. Curved sabre-knife lance arrowheads with grooves for blood, the bow – these were the first to drop from the hands of the brown peoples. There was no sense going around with old weapons, the Whites offered stronger ones, easier to handle. It was not only weapons they brought; they sat among the dark men and women and showed them how to summon dangerous powers from air and earth, how these could be enhanced and concentrated. There was nothing the black- and brown-skinned peoples wanted more than the new guns gases deflecting shields and masks. And when they had the guns and achieved domination over their neighbours, in their warrior zeal they abandoned the wooden granaries roundhouses made of mud acacia-twigs, roofs of straw. Houses of iron and glass from the northern zones, easy to erect, advanced inexorably. And people clamoured to know how to make these things, in order to make new things and conquer distant tribes. On the west coast, along the middle Niger, Lake Tanganyika, Senegal where strong Negro states existed, warlike natives drove the first mines into unspoiled earth. Tribe after tribe was exterminated. The enervating opulent beauty, the luxuriant abundance of the country struggled always against the greed of people backed by the northern miracle-devices. Now enormous native empires arose; like tropical plants they spread rapidly, devoured others, collapsed in on themselves.

While empires were collapsing barricading themselves in, more proud hordes of Whites arrived by air and land, explorers inventors, lords of the powers, handed out their devices, themselves melted into the colours and heat of the land. But the black brown grey-brown peoples felt the lure of the source of these powers; they thronged north. And it was a curious fate that now awaited the iron White tribes: their fertility dropped. While their brains sped on to ever more glorious deeds, the root shrivelled. Among all the European peoples over the course of decades, birthrates dropped everywhere. It was not clear if this anomaly was linked with newly discovered rays and gases, or with the exciting alluring development of artificial intoxicants and narcotics. All the more fertile were the libidinous brown and black people thronging to the radiant centres, sweating men and women with flashing melancholy eyes who came on the scene as servants, and within a few generations had overwhelmed everything.

BOOSTERS

BOOSTERS SWARMED across the continents of Africa America Europe like flocks of demons. These were men and women who enticed with the things they offered – enticed, seduced, stirred up conflict. People were a growing bundle a sand-heap of needs, onto which the boosters blew more sand. People a-quiver with tension, like air above a fire. From every great townzone region men and women appeared everywhere, observed, brought with them objects pleasures blandishments, comforting and benign. People in the towns and in more open country changed visibly. The boosters held all the cards, needed only guide the action, and those they whipped up came thronging, cried out at every stroke. Earlier generations had been content with food clothing warmth, modest amusements. The people of the devices saw clearly that this was not enough. The western peoples had big desires; more must be given them.

Messages were spread. In the townzones they had manmade magical devices that broadcast to every other place what people here were up to, what they were talking about, how they were modifying their surroundings, what distinctive changes were in progress. Tele-pictures sent out images of people and objects. Any stimulus that stood out was a firestorm that grew from a spark to a flame to engulf a whole neighbourhood, a town. In distant lands, on mountainsides, along wild rushing rivers, on sultry tropical animal-teeming plains dwelled people who kept themselves to themselves. Stimuli words images reached them. Images were there before their eyes, appeared again and again, tugged at them. Told them to leave the river behind, come away from the cradling heat. Like a shovel under a pile of stones lying mossy on the ground, the blandishments scraped at the people, lifted them, scattered them.

ANGLO-SAXON IMPERIUM

THE OLD political states still existed in name. As skin colours, faces Arab Egyptian Negroid changed, as languages became a pidgin mixing features of northern and southern regions, so the states lost their former strict identity. An almost uniform mass of humanity populated the region from Oslo to Madrid to Constantinople. As with language, here one variety predominated, there another.

Over a couple of centuries, the regions inhabited by the western peoples had come under the dominion of New York-London. It was in the Anglo-Saxon Imperium that streams of dusky grey black brown white people slowly intermingled. Then the ramshackle political powers fell apart. As devices and inventions piled up, general prosperity increased. Almost every activity became easier, speedier. But in this historical phase dangers became evident, which only centuries later would blossom to their full enormity. The devices needed only a small number of human operatives. Wars in earlier times fed themselves; now people could be mobilised only by ever more novel inventions that caused the collapse of old and the growth of new industries. This slack easeful period, when people lived on the discoveries of previous decades which they left unimpeded to work themselves out, saw the onset of the first great silent catastrophe.

In order to keep a grip on the populace, the owners of factories and inventions, main beneficiaries of the flowing wealth, made work stretch out, added intermediate tasks, even mothballed important machines to create work. They built enormous excessive bureaucracies of oversight and accounting. But such forced anxious cumbersome measures were not enough. Enterprises were almost overwhelmed, but more so the cities as people kept pouring in. The barons of technology no longer knew how to maintain the appearance of work. They wondered if they should spur their colleagues and scientists to new inventions, or rather dismantle their own enterprises. They were aghast at the wealth flowing to them; a curious sense of guilt drove them to divest themselves of property. They struggled horrified at the technologies

that had grown up over them, and at a populace growing in numbers and fertility.

There came a time when industry, at first on its own, later with state support, set up a gigantic all-encompassing system for distributing money and goods – goods it handed over voluntarily. Industries nourished the state, but hid in the background. It seemed they wanted to avoid decisions, to redeem themselves. Then they grew into their role. As money and goods poured from their cornucopias they sensed what it was they were, what they had. A few industrialists, unable to shoulder the responsibility, dumped their factories in the lap of the state. But most began to intervene in the almost automatic machinery of distribution. With two or three strokes their mighty enterprises were swept almost entirely free of people. They wanted controls on migration, independent decision-making over the distribution of goods. Since the state and political government depended solely on them, they wanted power over the government. As hunger and refugees increased, the machine-barons stockpiled money and goods. Governments stepped up. They tried to befriend the dangerous volatile masses. The industries had been waiting for this. They rejected the old system of charity. In every state those wielding political power drew closer to the barons of industry, who had ferreted the government out like a starving fox from its lair.

Now that the confrontation between owners and dependents was in the open, there was no holding back. In Belgian lands, in Brussels, the first long-expected blow was struck. A member of parliament, a representative of the employers, at their behest cynically declared that he declined to negotiate or to recognise any so-called public institution. This parliament had been elected by the so-called people; he recognised only employers, and on the other side only workers and dependents. Ministers should be banned from talking of the public welfare; that was something a minister could know nothing about.

Next day the ministers were deposed. The army had long been in the hands of the great industrial technology cartels. As everywhere in Europe, it comprised young men from factories and workshops where they had learned to assemble and maintain weaponry. They had nothing but respect for working men and women, had no idea what the so-called politicians were up to. The masses in the cities did not rebel, were swiftly pacified. They felt an intimate connection with the machines, demanded only luxury, bread and free rein for the powers of the machines. Political ministries were subjected to inspections by the centres of technological and industrial power. Then their structures were diverted to other purposes. Welfare systems were annexed by the agencies for work supervision and assignment. Relations with other states had, in the Anglo-Saxon Imperium, already long been a preserve of the great cartels.

The events unfolding almost silently in Belgium had an enormous impact on neighbouring states. Hardly a decade passed before political governments, now mere hindrances and decorative relics, yielded their place – voluntarily or involuntarily, partly under pressure from England – to industrial bodies. Sham parliaments, meaningless regulatory self-governing bodies, operated alongside these. In the great reservoirs of humankind, the city-states and townzones, senates formed, their leading positions occupied by people of the devices.

REBELLIONS

THE TOWNZONES sat there in their freedom. But each surrounded itself with an invisible system of defensive works. These regions of mountains lowlands rivers lakes swamps, stretching farther than the eye could see, sprinkled with a sugar-glaze of low buildings, factories kilometres long, human settlements dispersed and concentrated, were everywhere at their periphery marked by inconspicuous lines of wooden masts. These were free-standing, resembled very tall poplars stripped of their branches. They looked like signposts, displayed notice-boards with street maps, disguised themselves as telegraph poles. Inside they were hollow, their guts bundles of long metal wires coiled together. The masts stood on granite plinths that provided connection to a cable. The metal wires were of different kinds. From a switch-room in the town, the bundle of wires could quickly be extended up through the top of the mast. It stretched out stiffly like a living pennant, and the moment it became fully extended it sent a swirl of deadly rays all around it.

Uprisings shook the continents. Fear gripped those who heard of the literally mocking ease with which the Frenchman Bourdieu, a simple technician, took control of the Mediterranean centre Marseilles. Suddenly thousands, emerging as if by magic from the obscurity of the towns, responded to his call, flocked to him. All he did was send a handful of toughs to occupy a number of power plants and switching stations. From materials available at the time, he knew instinctively how to make fearsome defensive and offensive weapons, which no one up till then had had occasion to develop. His first effort was to cause a systematic disruption of the global communications network. Step by step, working in secret, he took over settlements and economically important targets in Provence, the whole of southern France up to Bordeaux. Outside Bordeaux the lively man was killed by one of his own weapons: a device that flashed lightning, hurled fire onto targets miles away. Now, instead of going high in the air, a flash had streaked straight out at ground level. It should have been deflected by a second beam already aiming high into the clouds, but instead it scorched a wide path, turned Bourdieu and several of his people to ashes as they moved about his camp, caught in the back by the

fiery monster. It crashed smouldering into a grove of cypresses. This was near Bègles in the Garonne.

Bourdieu's core forces let valuable time go to waste. The annexed territories in their rear, cut off from economic links with the rest of the world, sat waiting criticising jeering. Until from Marseilles itself a group of young citizens, their blood stirred up, set out unobserved; at the same time a band of mercenary battle-ready Moroccans setting inland from the coast deceived Bourdieu's five-hundred-strong forces by responding to their phone messages and instructions, agreeing to join up with them at a specified morning hour in a field south of Bègles. As the forces waited there, their fire-hurling fire-deflecting weapons were destroyed and they themselves were massacred using what devices were left.

The victorious band that dealt this blow did not return to Marseilles with a full complement. The populace there was no less afraid of the approaching fighters than they had been of the now departed Bourdieu. The leader of the band received instructions to dispose swiftly and silently of all those Moroccans who had come into possession of certain secrets, or even of devices. A few days later, at the lovely strong-flowing Loire, he invited them to board six ships, bright with bunting and loud with jolly music. These set sail, keeping some distance between them. As they sailed he sent little leech-like augers against each of the ships below the waterline. So that ship after ship was forced irresistibly lower in the water, pulled by the silent submarines dragging them down, clinging fast with chains suction-pads feelers. The unmanned pliant glassy tubes, hammered down into the current by the furious blows of compressed gases bearing from the rear onto their hull-plates, suddenly pulled the Moroccans' vessels below the surface, more powerfully from second to second, clinging not letting go until ship and submarine had vanished from the churning white surface and crashed to the bed of the dark river in a cloud of sand, bounced jolted spun around.

The surviving leaders foresaw their own fate. They advised the rest of the fighters to disperse. They themselves appeared uninvited on the hills outside Marseilles, and in sight of the senators who had come to meet them destroyed in the open air such devices as they had. Thereby avoided death, but not the fate, when they re-entered the city, of summary dismissal from their previous posts. The Senate had grown wary.

For some time after this, every population centre in the Afro-Euro-American world was safe from specific threats. Everywhere a few secure secret primary locations for the distribution of energy had been established. There was constant uncertainty whether too many or too few people knew about the existence of the most powerful energy accumulators. No one worried these days about the long-range artillery bombs cannonballs of earlier times. Iron ordnance could be shot into the energy-laden air as vigorously as you like; the air was no less thick to it than the Earth's atmosphere to a meteor speeding in from the tenuous ether: miles from any town the ordnance's course would already be slowed by the opposing fury of electrical hurricanes from the masts; it would end in fragments, fall to the ground as glowing dust. The weakness of these large installations lay in the fact that the swirling current was directed straight ahead; it shielded the town at a certain height while lower down, up to house-height, no permanent shield was possible. For the energy that was emitted destroyed and burned everything in its path. If the masts were ever aimed at house height, one second later everything – stone wood flesh metal – would be transformed into a blazing soup.

Ever since the uprisings, everywhere there twitched a mild fear, laughingly brushed off but inwardly always present: people might secretly apply their scientific studies to dangerous things, and tougher harder more serious men than Bourdieu might draw conclusions from them. Slowly a ruling class formed in the towns. They knew everything; sat at drawing-boards, built models, worked with gases earthy materials in their laboratories. From them came the entrepreneurs of factories and workshops, the owners. They began to hold back the spread of certain kinds of knowledge. Foreigners, anyone they could not trust strove in vain to gain access to specialist schools. With a smile they were fed on old knowledge, kept busy with compartmented sub-fields. Not everyone could be granted access to the dangerous findings that were rapidly emerging. Only the chosen were allowed into Mathematics Engineering Chemistry Electrotechnology Biology Radiotechnology, their numbers reducing decade by decade. They were closely supervised by the political authorities. The theoretical sciences were enveloped in secrecy. The disciplines were segmented, so that no unvetted person could gain an overview.

MILAN

FOR A WHILE it seemed mankind might be about to restore slavery. The streaming countless swarms of dark and mixed-race people from the lands of Africa, content to enjoy all freely-available knowledge and pleasures, encouraged this tendency. Soon, in the Spanish and Italian townzones that bore the brunt of the heaviest influxes and had thrown up their own extraordinarily passionate and impatient leadership class, events occurred which demanded a change in the treatment of the masses. San Francisco and London had long been urging the rulers of Barcelona Madrid Milan Palermo, descendants of the Berber and Hausa, to clamp down hard, maintain the highest alertness. Foreigners who still had moon-worship in their blood should not be treated like people of northern origin. They might taste western and northern culture, but should not swallow it down. No one was inclined to listen.

In Milan, bull-necked pot-bellied Ravano della Carceri, whose grandfather had hunted elephant with black slaves, awaited the first worker unrest in his glass factory, which he was provoking. To provide his complacent friends in the city with a warning example, he allowed the unrest free rein. After two mulattos were shot and killed, his headquarters in the city centre were ransacked. He pretended to flee, leave everything in the lurch. He ignored jibes: he had time to observe how his factories were swamped with excitable people. The revolt never advanced beyond its initial stage. The turmoil spread from Carceri's people to the adjacent works of Sanudo and Horzi, and then to the neighbouring townzone of Pisa. Immigrant quarters were in uproar, the masses seethed, they sang songs from home, formed regional fraternities, in their foolish elation sent for wives and children. They radiated an innocent festive air. They gazed enraptured at the endless low enchanting factory buildings that had once overawed them, into which they had crept fearfully as under the eyes of demons; now black faces ran around the rooftops, made effigies.

As Morosini's food factory and two underground lines succumbed to the African insurgency, a colourful mob of agitators made its way to the Senate of the city, calling for its resignation. Ravano della Carceri was present at the hearing. The ringleaders of the deputation, two mulattos already wearing native shirts over European dungarees, ignored or perhaps failed to recognise the master of their workplace. This enraged him, and upset his plan to remain in the background behind the president's tall chair. He stomped over to the two men, grabbed them, bunched their shirts up to their chests: do they know who he is. Then: what do they mean by coming here.

At their sceptical shy laughter and the tittered remark - take a look at your factory; say, what's that hanging from the roof? The mulattos grinned and roared with laughter – he shook one vigorously by the straps of his dungarees: they'd better scram. The sturdy black man shook him off, and he was on the floor. Up from the floor at once, he seized the man by the throat, with one movement was sent flying to the ground, assailed with kicks; other immigrants came running, and in full view of the senators, who averted their gaze wrung their hands bit pale lips, gave him a good belting.

Belts in hand, swearing foully, they confronted the senators, who now stood exposed: what did they think of that. They meekly requested time to consider, were forced out of the room by the coarse threats of the immigrants. Amid jeers from the deputation, now making free with senatorial chairs and microphones, they were allowed to remove the semi-conscious Carceri. In the doorway a cane whistled savagely down on them; it broke the lower arm of grey ponderous Sanudo, who was supporting Carceri about the waist. He dropped the swaying man; immigrants rolled him through the doorway so they could slam the door shut behind them and start broadcasting boastful reports to the neighbourhood.

Carceri regained consciousness in a ground-floor room behind a back staircase, where they had taken refuge. He looked terrible; teeth were broken, he gurgled, a tooth had bored through his tongue, he slumped on a bench snapping at air, swellings the size of a fist on his forehead, spat blood, slurped brandy. Inwardly cursed that he had sacrificed himself for others. Old Sanudo was sitting on the floor. They cut away his sleeve; he cried out. Carceri groaned from his swollen face at those holding him: "You just do what you want. I'll do what I do." While the passage outside the barricaded door rang with song, they debated in whispers the best place to retreat to and await developments. Young and old were unanimous that the uprisings would subside even faster than the earlier armed revolts. They shrugged: we'll all meet our fate sooner or later; really we've done well to hang on this long.

When the noise outside died down, they slipped away. Reached the square outside the Council House. No one recognised them. The din in nearby streets was a mix of joy childish pleasure blood lust. The uproar did not yet extend all across Milan, but in the streets fights were already erupting over status and loot. Already cunning Europeans, siding with the immigrants and looking for ways to take over the movement, were eavesdropping on the discussion groups springing up everywhere; they drew the best orators aside and led this and that one to the loud unruly council chamber.

Ravano della Carceri felt a solemn rage rise steadily in him. These people would not rule over Italians and factories; let everything take its course. He gave young Giustiniani's arm a pinch. "It won't happen to me a second time, Giustiniani. They have no appetite for more of that."

They walked on, Giustiniani with head bowed, eyes on the grass, frowning: "We both come from the oldest lineage in this country, Carceri. I won't give in. To stinking Africans. To a mob: where does its strength come from? The loins. Men's balls, women's bellies. Those jabbermonkeys fatbutts parakeets. I'm ashamed to call them human. They crawl down from the trees and spit on us."

Carceri pulled the young man aside, sat with him under a tree, checked if anyone was around. He murmured, gesticulated: best not to speak too loud. The kid should be careful. Of other men and women of their class. If they heard him speak like that of blood, ancient family and so on, he'd notice something. "How much ancient blood is there, these days. Who doesn't have a drop of Africa in his veins. In a generation or two we're done for. Camel trains from Tiber to Po. Blood counts for nothing." He stomped about in his agitation.

"Quiet," Giustiniani soothed him, "it's all right. Here, look at this grass. Look, Carceri, at the moss on the bark. And more grass here. You can pull it up with your fingers, go on, try. Pull it slowly through your fingers. Be careful not to cut yourself, the edges are sharp. So, that's a blade of grass, pure and simple. These were underfoot where you were stamping around just now – you were trampling Africans, I think. Look, they're straight again, some are broken, but they're still alive. Listen to the little blades of grass growing quietly there again beneath your feet. The old songs of pious people were always on about grass, grass is like people, or people are like grass. And when the wind blows over, all trace of them is lost but the grass abides." Carceri had crooked his arms under his head: "I have some little weapons stashed away, for emergencies, and Sanudo has some too: nice pieces. Look like nothing, and if you see them, already you're nothing. Tonight or later this evening, when there's a large crowd, we might take them for an outing to the Senate. I

won't exclude Sanudo and Morosini and our other dear friends. Are you in? Say yes. Because you're like grass: indestructible, but naïve."

Now they were miles from the centre of Milan, in a cool subterranean house. A marble statue stood on the stepped podium of the vaulted vine-covered vine-hung room. The marble statue gleamed dull white, yellow as the sun. Now only the eyes in its head gleamed, now the shawl on the shoulder and the hands holding it gleamed silver and gold. When all else lay in darkness its breast was tinted pink-red, light's little bullets fired at the soft chin, lit from below the rounded figure with its shawl, bare feet stepping into gloom.

White-haired Sanudo, curled under blankets, proposed to the silent guests reclining on couches that they should use the weapons they had, give themselves a clear field of fire. Questions were asked about the nature of the weapons, then more torpid silence. Sanudo forced a smile, sat up: "We should be grateful they're allowing us enough time." He hobbled to the doorway and felt into the vines, caused a faint pattern in the vaulting to slide forward with distant echoes of childsong. Sanudo: "I know some colleagues here are reserving their opinion, and perhaps need more time before they disclose it. It would be a shame to let them stay silent. I'd like to know, for example, what Carceri is keeping to himself."

Carceri, with a coarse laugh: "What do you think, my dear fellow?"

"That you're lurking, waiting to see what we shall do. I've as much at stake as you. You don't care about me and the others, but you can't manage it on your own."

Carceri growled, pushed himself up from the couch: "I don't care about the others. Do they care about me? Didn't I warn years ago, when ship after ship was coming from Algiers from Senegal from Tripoli, and every one of them emptying these people over us like slops from a bucket? Didn't I warn you in this very room? It was the same then: if the worst comes to the worst we have weapons! No one knows about them! Secret devices! Oh your secret mysterious devices. I'm not sure if among the brightshirts there aren't some who have their own devices; God sends them to them in their sleep: And discoveries shall ye make."

"So what we should do," Sanudo resignedly stroked his injured arm, "is not allow any more ships in, maybe sink them? You had particular plans, which you never explained clearly. We're not in the Central Africa of olden days, after all. We're talking about human beings."

Carceri advanced, arms waving: "That's it! We're dealing with human beings. You're so gentle. Pat them so they eat sugarlumps from your hand. See, you don't even do that. We stuff them full. They want more. Us they don't want at all. All they want is us out of the way. So give them that pleasure. They're human. You can't take their will from them. And we are cleverer. The clever give way."

A silence. Wily Carceri shrugged his broad shoulders, sighed a loud weary sigh, let his long cloak slide in a heap to the couch, whispered with Giustiniani. The statue gleamed very white, like daylight. Sanudo glanced at Carceri: "I see that Carceri still has his old attitude: this and that *should have* happened. He proposes nothing about what should happen *now*. I'm an old man, Carceri. I'm not of European blood like you. Not so long ago my forefathers were nomads camel-drivers date-growers water-dowsers, like those out there who have us at their mercy. It would be easier for me to surrender to them. It wouldn't even be surrender. I could smooth a path to them. But that won't work. I've learned something in the meantime. Something has made its way into my blood. I'm damned if I'll hand everything over to them that we and those before us have created."

Carceri reluctant and seemingly sleepy: he won't go on arguing, has said what he wanted to say. Giustiniani kept quiet at a glance from Carceri: clearly Carceri wanted no joint action with the others. Sanudo was urged to bring in everyone who could be trusted. They meant to strike at night when the victorious mob, now in possession of all Milan, would be revelling. Sanudo implored Carceri to join them. He waved them away, as did Giustiniani.

For their assault, these two hundred or so of the ruling elite grouped in the city's central district, in squares off the main streets, behind bushes in parks. They met total failure. The devices, of different construction and with different modes of application, different distance effects, and penetrators taking either a direct line or steered in a zigzag by intermediate linkages, all failed to deliver. The equilibrium state of the atmosphere at ground-level was disturbed by the immigrants who, half in fun and half fearful, had stationed themselves at every energy-transformer and commutator and set every device randomly in play. Stealthy attempts next day produced the same result: it turned out that the portable weapons, very sensitive, were affected by intense sunlight. Meant to silently neutralise whole rows of buildings, they were duds.

At that time in southern Europe, women were among the most active elements. They had grown stronger during the terrible economic struggles of earlier times, when the supply of human material was judged excessive. Everywhere the bonds of marriage and the hierarchy of man and wife were destroyed by the pressures men were under to sacrifice wives and daughters to the economic struggle. Cruel hard decades, when in every land of the intermingled peoples knife confronted knife, while at the same time discoveries and the conquest of Nature pressed on as never before.

As tensions faded, as great discoveries arrived and goods were heaped on the broad masses, men and women were already changed. White males found, alongside the streaming summoned coloured people from Africa, a white tribe who were like and not like them. They could not decide whether to fight or join them. Neither happened. The women did what they could, and with less sentimentality than men. To the fury of white males they had no special feeling for Whites but mixed freely with immigrants. Men labelled relations with coloured people, common in the tropics, as taboo, but women had slipped from their control, did in their country what men had always done abroad. Did so for a mere century and a half. Then the danger of the new upcoming types became clear. Somehow, in order not to drown, a stop had to be

put to it.

At that time only common women mixed with the immigrants. The more powerful – organisers, great owners and creators of giant factories, talented and daring female experimenters, big strong muscular women with long strides and quizzical hard features – developed a conception of themselves as a superior race. They pulled back to where they were safe from new onslaughts; became the avant-garde in the struggle for a full-blown massively developed and developing technology. They had little mother-love to offer. It was they who leapt first into action when abject defeat loomed in the Milan townzone. Women had nothing of the hesitant deliberation, resignation in the face of defeat, to which men, especially the impotent older generation, gave voice. They deeply mistrusted the immigrants, and had little faith in the men of their own class and race. They were horrified at the thought of leaving to these men – among whom they felt themselves equal but also victorious interlopers, and often felt hatred of them, even disgust – matters which could be catastrophic for women too. In not a few women the dreadful thought arose: men might betray them to the immigrants out of revenge; they suspected that the men were yielding because they wanted to escape from matriarchy; a matriarchy they saw coming with a sense of shame, still locked in their patriarchal ways.

Women leapt into action. Possessing no deadly assault weapons, they went as they were in the red and blue togas worn by upper-class females to locations where silently roaring masses of energy were generated transformed distributed, and when amid cheering and jeers they were granted access to the delicate powerful machinery, they tried to stab and shoot the knowledgeable among the usurpers. In many cases it worked. The women were killed on the spot; the power plant was switched off for a short time or broke down; the usurpers took no chances, allowed in none they were unsure of; the profound distrustfulness of nomadic tribes came into play.

So the women demeaned themselves by despatching young alluring creatures of their class to engage in sham negotiations with the new masters. The girls, while rejecting every advance, were to go over to the immigrants, wind the lecherous foreigners around their little finger to gain access to cables and transformers. They were given a form of words that half-revealed a secret: women would offer their services, provided the foreigners did not seek to enslave them. The fate of Milan, of all southern Europe, hung by a hair. The women, at that time united almost as in a league, were not unanimously behind the plan to let the men of their race be defeated while they themselves went to serve the immigrants. The young creatures in Milan passed on the half-truth to the brown and tawny men, who found it pleasant. But then the pretty young envoys experienced a fate that harked back to the cruellest of times for women: following abuse and rape in the presence of many men and cheering women, they were passed on as slaves to old men.

Ravano della Carceri, Giustiniani, Sanudo left Milanese territory a week after the uprising, tramped the dangerous roads to Alessandria and then flew on to Genoa. Called on Genoa Marseilles Bourdeaux for support. Giustiniani flew to London, centre of western governing power. London declared, as was predictable, that any involvement of the central power could be considered only when local defensive measures had self-evidently failed. Giustiniani, presenting his report very calmly, saw only hostile faces. The Londoners said that affairs in Milan had clearly not been handled competently; perhaps they should revert to the appointment of magistrates by London; did no one see the risk, not for oneself alone but for everyone, when important matters were handed over or surrendered to opponents and agitators, like a poison cupboard to a mad apothecary who kills half a town with it. Rome Marseilles Bordeaux, still free but already threatened, declared their readiness to help, but demanded safeguards in their own interest against a repetition of such incidents.

When he reached Rome, Giustiniani's report from London drew attention; the insult seemed justified, and aroused anger against both Milan and London. Rome, placed in great danger by Milan, like Genoa and Bordeaux demanded supervision over Milan and its appendages. The Milan delegation had to submit and sign their names, or else forego formal recognition as representatives of the zone. For the rest, as far as Milan was concerned, there remained no possible solution with regard to the seized power plants other than to destroy the larger and most important parts of the townzone. This occurred four days later, twenty days after the revolt broke out. The burning choking city was again in the hands of its masters.

Suffering grief-stricken Sanudo played no further role in the new Milan. A Supervisor, an emissary of London, was installed alongside the Senate. Carceri's moment had arrived. He tried to gain the upper hand in Milan, encountered resistance from women, who bared their teeth at him. At first young Giustiniani supported the bearlike Carceri, who openly declared that he had pushed things to their limit and now he'd show how it should be done. Such cynicism made him unacceptable to many men, and certainly all the women, disabusing those who once had feared his viciousness and violence. Carceri influenced developments in southern Europe for only a short time; he quarrelled with Giustiniani, who refused to defer to him. An assassination attempt by Carceri on Giustiniani, now the target of all his malice, failed.

Next day Carceri succumbed to injuries sustained when his house was blown up, by women. Bold spirited Giustiniani, steely sallow man, brought the suspects before the court. His hand, which would be felt by southern townzones for two decades, was not less hard than that of his slain friend Carceri, around whose demolished residence he erected a fence which was not to be removed. He repelled the advance of the women, kept them in check for a long while. Until in desperation, unnerved by his isolation, he retreated like hundreds of his time to the enticing dropout spots of Europe and America, along the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. It was the time of Feminist Unions, of jaunty irresistible leagues, of moribund male power. Female fury pursued Giustiniani to Tarabulus in Great Syrtis.

HELOTS, EUNUCHS, WOMEN

THE MILAN AFFAIR at the beginning of the 23rd century unleashed, first in Rome and then in neighbouring centres of southern Europe, a movement which imposed tighter controls on the spread of knowledge and the technologies of domination, leading to the formation of a tiny elite of rulers and a gigantic mass of the ruled. The bodies of a hundred thousand coloured and mixed-race people in the Po plain had not yet mouldered when men and women gathered at Dunkirk, by the pounding North Sea, summoned there by London. They slipped quietly down to the cold stormy autumnal coast. London knew what it wanted; the delegations soon found out. Mingling in the casinos, on sailing boats, on strolls along the dunes, in tented picnics, they came to conclusions that could not be divulged to the telespeakers. All were quickly seized by the extreme seriousness radiating from London and New York. London, pessimistic as ever, foresaw the collapse of the western world.

The government officials, male and female, proceeding here so forcefully bore the marks of immigration from the far west. More than a century earlier, as White fertility declined, Indian tribes from North and South America had spread across Brazil and Canada. Since the Anglo-Saxons had penetrated deepest into South America, it was mainly in the service of London that they came as auxiliary workers, some heading to western Europe, some to Scotland. The southern Europeans saw the curious sparse black beards, jutting rounded cheekbones of the commissioners from London, tense figures who cast gloomy black looks and gazed past whomever they were speaking to. They spoke in soft high voices, their language a Spanish-based pidgin.

As the heirs of world power, they made clear that they had no intention of monitoring the capacities of nations and regions; required accounts of what had been done to protect neighbours – and the central power – from harm. When Giustiniani turned up on the beach at Dunkirk, a serious confrontation broke out between him and the London group. How dare Milan and the southern cities, which had only just been rescued, send a man like this from the most incompetent circles in Milan. Giustiniani silenced them with hard words. They recognised the danger he posed, soon got to know him better. The powerful men from London did not yield to female colleagues who, urged on by their friends among the Milanese women, demanded the removal of the smooth icy man. But it was this man who gave voice to Carceri's plan for slavery. The plan was irresistible. It was at once passed on to London. The commissioners appropriated it as their own.

The Dunkirk meeting, of decisive importance for the fate of the western peoples, ended after two weeks with reports from the delegations to their governments senates and de facto power-holders, urging the defence of current civilisation by all conceivable means and at whatever cost. They stressed the dangers if any local power group, whether nation or townzone, should be overthrown. Followed it up with the right of neighbouring states and, behind them, the central power of London-New York, to inspect the ubiquitous defensive installations and measures that were in place.

The long-bearded representatives from London explained that in the common interest they were forced to reinstate the defunct practice of appointing local commissions and observation units. No power group should construe this as a ploy by London to extend its power; such security measures were in the interests of all. So what had been shaken off long decades ago, more than a century in fact, was back again. No one could argue against it, for the gravity of England's stance seemed justified; the coming measures could not be implemented without consolidated action.

From Dunkirk the spirit of a helot economy streamed across Europe America Africa. Delegations and senates in every country state townzone undertook to seal off science technology all conceivable practical knowledge. Neglecting to do so would lead to the loss of the delinquent entity's independence. After Dunkirk every centre was driven to develop ultra-secret plans to secure crucial matters relating to power generation foodstuffs transportation, weaponry defensive and offensive, and to calculate the numbers of personnel needed for workplaces and executive organs, and for coordination. The requisite number of operatives was calculated on the basis of no more rampant progress; indeed, there was clear potential for stagnation. Operatives were recruited from a single social class; senates identified reliable clans, power-holders were everywhere to be drawn from these. The stringency of the initial actions led in most polities to the formation of very small groups, sympathetic to London's observation units and forming with them a sort of Committee of Public Safety; they exercised permanent control over public life and the ruling clans.

All this happened in secret, and at first none among the populace noticed. It was merely a stricter application of the old methods. Anyone who asked questions was pointed to examples of dangers in the current situation. The more persistent were brushed off or deported. London Berlin Paris Milan Marseilles New York had a new noble class, clustered around fearsome technologies.

These men and women, de facto power-holders in the west of the Earth, were suspicious of one another, contemptuous of pleasure, always solitary. None went about unless armed with the little weapons reserved only for them. They always turned up unexpectedly. In the various polities the Public Safety Committees and their observers were equipped like them with lights whose rays, reflected through a mechanism of mirrors and dazzlers, made the bearer to all intents and purposes invisible. They were like a wall clad in mirrors; you thought you could walk through it. In this way they were able to go, seemingly transparent, down the street or even into houses. They rode drove flew unseen.

Rumours spread among the populace. Undesirable or dangerous individuals were dealt with in a remarkable manner. The dead could never be found, just as no one ever saw the living taken away. A man, a young woman might step around

a tree, turn the corner of a house, would bend over, grab their chest, clutch at their back, make a curious movement as if something was jerking or pinching, and was gone. Nothing at the spot but a stronger play of sunlight, dust from a gust of wind. Many such events were witnessed, rumours spread, the law paid attention to these; explanations were never forthcoming, because those who disappeared were never found. Complainants were right to assert that they had been assassinated or well hidden. The mirror-cloak concealed the victims as the abductors dragged them clumsily to a secret laboratory, where they never even saw the flash from the wall against which their crookedly smiling face was pressed. Collapsing in a soft mass, they smouldered on the sparking floor. Sparks continued to fly until white ashes danced around them like drifting sand.

The power-holders soon saw the dangers their weapons posed to themselves. Tried to overcome the mistrust they harboured for one another. No one could know where a particular incident of envy bitterness sudden anger would lead. They saw that they and others were as defencelessly exposed to their subconscious drives as a dreamer to his fancies. How often did they stand in a dark mood gazing into a forest, look up from a balcony to sunlit treetops, those dark evergreens lofting yellow-brown cones up into the vast silent heights, quietly growing: and the human being scrabbles around inside himself, moves about, scrabbles.

Efforts at reconciliation were dreadfully hampered by the growing solidarity of women engaged in the unending struggle against patriarchy. Men in the state apparatus, the Public Safety Committees, could not conceal from themselves how they feared for their lives. No rumours had spread of the Milanese women's offer to the foreigners at the time of the great immigrant uprising; but it was clear that treasonous thoughts were rife among women. There was no way to exclude women from the senates; the men did not even think to do so. The women were powerful confident tough, their strength their will their spirit indispensable. Many men at this time were inclined simply to leave the field to women. Members of the most powerful clans retired from important public office in order to avoid confrontations with women. The most dangerous places were the Monitoring Committees; disagreements here were inevitable. Often a truce was arranged. In private, both parties were on their guard, looked for ways to arm themselves.

The 23rd and 24th centuries saw the great reshaping of Africa: the wide incursion of the sea on an east-west line between Capes Blanc and Bojador south of the Canary Islands, inundation of the low-lying basins of Igdi Tanezrouft Afelele up to the western edge of the Timmo Mountains. The mighty continent of Africa was sundered and separated by the Saharan Sea.

World powers were already reduced to two: London, and India-China-Japan. Townzones spread, national glory became ever more pronounced and tawdry amid a dead and dying political life. The powers in the zones and state entities everywhere adopted the same methods, driven both by pressure to assert themselves, and by the devices around which they clustered: techniques of arousal satiation stuffing overfeeding. Obesity consequent on castration, the affectation placidity benevolence and sweetness of eunuchy became fashionable: grotesque impotent impulse. They were spared the narcissism of the masses. Monitoring Committees went secretly among the people, but already even the austere ruling clans were drinking from the poison they served. The flow of inventions abated, people lived from what had been handed down, settled into the rights and duties assigned them.

And women were the swiftest to grow decadent. Titanic figures emerged among them at this period, extravagant in appetites and lust for domination. What in earlier times had been accomplished in astonishing ways by the deeds of ascendant blacks was now their work: pull together polities of willingly caponised males, build them up rapidly and with fervour, bask in glory, in order sooner or later to be deposed because of some triviality, something overlooked or in plain sight, by a neighbouring state or by London.

MELISE OF BORDEAUX

HOW SHE rampaged, Melise of Bordeaux!

This female, in whose veins black African blood flowed mixed with the zones of Italy and western France, overturned every agreement reached by the spineless childish people around her. She saw how people delivered themselves to pleasure and grew soft and softer and surrounded themselves with a likeminded clique. She was of a savage passionate sensuality that was at the same time cold and repellent; she herself suffered. She coiled around her lovers, male and female, like a giant snake, crushed them until she was sated, left them lying frightened there. No one ever knew when she was in earnest, this crinklehaired thicklipped woman with glittering black eyes, who wept often and loudly, bemoaned herself and her fate. She cried like a drunkard, melodiously without depth, ending in a graceless laugh of vexation. She induced every clan in her townzones to hand their most important weapons and installations over to her followers. She destroyed a number of installations, not knowing how to make use of them and so deeming them superfluous. Soon she distinguished two categories of townzone over which she exercised dominion: pet-zones and slave-zones. She located infrastructure for food production and life-essential materials in the slave-zones; their governors were

developed into leaders and devotees of this work.

She and her followers adopted highhanded ways. They openly put on airs as rulers and sovereigns, relished the astonishment and outrage when they turned up at general assemblies of the western townzones with an extravagant retinue. They provoked fury, but proved infectious. And so Melise of Bordeaux, the big-haired noble-nosed honey-coloured woman and her followers were the hammer that shattered many a ruling group, leading to dangerous convulsions in central European zones, which actually harboured a desire for similar pomp and savage glory. The going became rough here whenever a capon tried to run wild, or a hen to strut like a peacock. The ruling elites wore each other down with furtive assassinations, sly acts of violence; order could be restored only through violence.

Sometimes this was London's work. London never lost sight of the risk of mass revolt. It let things play for a while, then swooped like an eagle on the quarrelsome, forced them to behave. London's long arm was felt even in the heart of central Europe, where peace seemed out of reach: even before the Urals War, six strong townzone regions had lost their independence, among them Munich and Bratislava. They had to endure the domination of English clans.

Melise reigned in Bordeaux as queen-autocrat, had a cathedral built for her on open land by the Garonne, southeast of Bordeaux, where she prayed and had the people worship her. For it was never quite clear what she and the priests she had solemnly consecrated were up to when she sat with them in the transept, her gaze sweeping across the congregation, heavily beringed hands joined, fleshy arms bare to the shoulder, gold brocade and ivory pendants at her large slowly rising falling breast. Even when the townzones of southern and eastern France fell to her, she was never so presumptuous as to hold her hand out for more. Was always submissive, servile even, towards London. She never sought alliance with the Feminist Leagues that spread their shoots everywhere; she had as little love for women as for men, and was unassailable on that score. Her demand was for worship and submission; of these she could never have enough. She killed or castrated dozens of men she suspected of disloyalty. At the same time she killed or rendered incapable of sex any women who came under suspicion along with these men. For some time she wavered in her attitude towards women; it seemed that in her jealousy and pride she could not but see women as her enemy.

And then this queen was broken by a female, a girl of her clan who could have been her own daughter. The charming little pale tawny creature was brought before Melise after her lover was put to death. Melise drank a great deal. In howling misery she clung to the gentle frightened girl, who kept silent. Melise struck at her with a steel hairbrush, at the arms that had embraced that man, at the cheeks the girl had allowed to be kissed; she traced with her fingers the lips turned to pulp by the hairbrush. The girl wept unresisting, cried, begged forgiveness and mercy. In fact she had no idea who the man was who had taken her. He had indeed taken her, for she had no desire to go with men. Melise, brush in her fist, digging a long needle into her massive thigh, spraying spittle, face red and swollen, stood over the half-naked girl lying on the carpet, whose clothes she had torn off to see what the attraction was. The bleeding terrified creature, tears running down her scored cheeks and joining a stream of blood from her nose to make a slimy trail on the carpet, looked up helplessly wailing, spitting swallowing, wiped her face on the carpet, crawled to the jangling violent woman.

Suddenly, at a glance, this woman was seized by a sense of self-loathing. She lifted her fists from the gentle girl, stared at brush and needle, settled slowly thoughtfully onto a bench. She looked down at the girl, who followed her attentively with her eyes, more frightened than ever. This thing, thought Melise, has done nothing, she's not guilty, the man took her, the man did to the silly creature what men have always done to women. Men strut around, take this one today, that one tomorrow, damn them all. Melise did not for a moment reflect on herself. She frowned growling, aimed a couple more blows with the brush at the girl, then pulled her struggling threshing and stabbed the needle through her palm, holding the girl's hand firmly between her knees. The needle went right through the hand of the screaming writhing staring thing into Melise's knee; she tensed, absorbed the pain, and groaned like the girl with wide open mouth, head flung back. Pulled the needle out and flung it away, sank to the carpet, moaned. Her arms scrabbled uselessly after the scurrying girl, then she crawled after her, pulled her close, pressed the jerking head, which she held by the hair, to hers on the damp carpet, howled, aped the girl's whimpering.

"Come," Melise sighed, "you're mine. Nothing will happen to you. They won't do anything to us. No one will dare. Oh it hurts. I've had enough. I've hurt you. Stay here. Stay with me." And the beaten tormented girl had to pull the broken groaning pleading woman to her feet, lead her to a chair. Melise sank into it, pulled her onto her lap, rubbed her face against the little breasts. "Oh. What sort of life is this. Murderers all around. If only I could be rid of them. Don't be cross with me. Are you cross with me, naughty lips, poor little hands. It'll all be better. We'll have our revenge."

And the child put an arm around the woman. Who felt a tenderness that shocked her, a restoring melting tenderness from the smiling gaze the bruised swollen face; it enveloped her. A child, she thought, just a child. What a child I am too. Pressed her face to the source of the upwelling tenderness.

This aborted killing sealed Melise's fate. She became ever more easily enraged, more challenging. Found no balance between men and women. As always she angrily brushed away approaches from the Feminist Leagues; men she desired not at all.

On a whim, for some obscure reason she took to calling herself Persephone. This happened long before anyone, even she herself, knew what it meant. Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, was the one who stole from the Earth the wicked deserving of death and took them down into darkness. She wanted to be Persephone. The death sentences handed down by her court in the cathedral at Toulouse became notorious. The priests were horrified, refused to collude. Melise laughed, dressed women in priestly garb, they had to stay close to her; yet always some, notably the most powerful of the priests, could spot those who feared her and those she kept on a close leash. She had peasants workers arrested on the

streets in houses in the fields. Purple and black on her altar-throne, heavily made-up, thick lips bright blood-red, eyes circled in blue, she ordered them to account for themselves. Like a mediaeval prince she surrounded herself with a feared troop of armed bodyguards. They wore caps and masks, thigh-boots to the crotch, were male and female. They had rucksacks, held wirebound staves like spears, stood along the walls and seemed hardly human.

The queen heard those brought before her. They must tell about themselves, what they knew. Then they were stripped of their clothes, and had to tell more. Persephone saw and heard these people, men women girls youths, brought before her shaking in fear and anger, weeping, begging for mercy. She is Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, she said. Do they not recognise the sceptre in her hand, do they not know they must appear promptly, that between now and now, death and life, field and death, street and death, lies only a moment's space. That moment elapsed as soon as they entered the cathedral. They must leave their work, it will proceed without them; it does not merit their hands. The hour has come for her, Queen Persephone. To her must be shown every limb, voice, movement; whether they still have a right to live, or must go below. She screamed, rose from her seat, brandished the sceptre, face dark: "It's over. Houses streets machines fields have had enough of you. You've given them enough. Now my hour has come."

But as she sat listened observed interrogated, she had with her whatever she fancied. From her high-piled hair she took the long needles that pinned it on each side. She threw them towards the purple priest-creatures. The one at whose feet they fell was dragged up the steps to her.

It was strong men, lovely lean pale men, husbands and brown youths, voluptuous girls and women that she took to herself and banished from the Earth. Such profound bliss Melise felt, handing her sceptre to a priestess at her side, when she received embraced the man, the woman. How it coiled, warm gentle; they never knew if she was blessing or condemning them. But they were being blessed. The queen drew them to her, stood up. Squeezed their faces in her arms, her bare heavy breasts. Her hands travelled over faces shoulders hips. She touched stroked the secret places of the bodies. The priests and priestesses on their knees, faces averted, sang hymns. A gentle confusion stirred in those she embraced. It entered the throat that offered itself dreamy, savage, scrabbled at the solemn ghastly head, the huge shoulders. Here was its fate. The head that had just now sought Melise's mouth turned aside with a little moan. The naked body twisted, as if seeking contact it could not find. As Persephone fell back in her chair, drunken eyes, face contorted with sobs, amid the austere whining music that welled and crashed like waves, the person rolled away from her: once it had been someone and now belonged to her, she bore it in her. A body incorporated in her, torn from the fields from the earth.

Melise swelled with all the bodies she incorporated into her. She was no longer Persephone but Hades, the Underworld itself. Her region, stretching from Bordeaux to beyond Toulouse, remained viable, and England continued to support the growing strength of this state even as it collapsed in insatiable excess. The tender delicate childlike creature she had tortured, gentle Betise, was the last whose sacrifice was required. Who would long ago have given herself to the queen, if only wild restless Melise had wanted it. Melise toyed with her, protected her, fussed about her. Betise was never allowed to attend her ceremonies, was kept in a house, a chateau almost, near Bordeaux, watched by the queen's women. For months on end the queen neglected her. But then she came, for hours that were abstracted loving preoccupied half-silent. The tender creature knew that when Melise stood there, head bowed with a faraway gaze, she was not to speak. Even though she was begged.

The queen came to Betise as she lay asleep on cushions, sunbeams playing across her. When the big strong striding woman kicked the cushions, Betise leapt to her feet. Tittered, stretched sweetly, inwardly terrified: scabs and streaks of blood on the woman's brown almost naked body; arms blood-smeared, fingers covered in a black crust, breasts and hips dripping, eyes empty; the face unhappy. Persephone looked at the child, scowled. Whimpered as she stood, hands hanging slack, fingers twitching trembling, smeared with the blood of those she had embraced. In her the insatiable urge for more; she was immersed in despair, had already elevated her priestesses to goddesses. "The Earth must be unpeopled," she said as she seized a priestess-goddess. They screamed and struggled as she took them into herself. Now she stood groaning before Betise, saw her for the first time, dropped onto the warm scented cushions as the child jumped up.

"I'll give you a good wash." Betise stroked her hair as she knelt behind her.

"Why should you wash me. Look at me. I am Persephone." Chewed the cushions. "I am not Melise. Not Melise."

"You are Melise. Melise, really you are. I'll give you a good wash."

"No. You won't. Leave it."

"Wash it away. I shall show you Melise, my *douce Melise, Melise ma pauvre fille* – how sweet that you have come to me – I'll show you what you have under all the blood. What you have hidden there. See the sponge. It's just a sponge. There's water in it. Pay attention, you beautiful thing, what they can do for you, yellow sponge and clear water. We'll take it all away, the red the black the smears the crusts. They don't belong on my lovely dark queen. See what fine smooth skin a queen has, it's showing itself, brown like mine, no, much darker. It was just waiting there. See it reflected in the water, ah. Lie back. I'll take it all away. You needn't move a muscle."

"Betise, silly girl. Do you know what it is lying here? Have you heard?"

"Yes. But lie still. I've heard. That you have the loveliest brown skin, better than mine. That you are my queen and you – have your fun. Here, feet apart please. It's dripped down below your knees. They've wrapped you up so we can't see you. Was it really so nice, Melise?"

"As long, oh as long as I can feel it, Betise. As long as I can embrace the life that is in people, it's nice. As long as blood sprays on me, it's nice."

“And my water? Nice?”

“Your water, your water.” Melise hoisted herself wearily up. “Am I done now?”

“Your girdle is still sticky. Now I’ll take off your girdle.”

“No you won’t.”

“Why not. You’re embarrassed in front of me. Am I not a woman. You’re nice and clean now. I’ll dry you off. One step at a time, Betise.” Betise laughed: “I called you Betise. Yes, now I call you Betise.”

“And you will be Melise.”

“Yes, I’m my own *pauvre fille* Melise. I serve – do you know who? Poor Betise who must sit in a room, must sleep on cushions and be sad and wait for someone to come and tell her things. About the great queen. If only she knew what the queen was up to, if only the queen had taken her along, just once.”

“Oh, Betise.” Melise, heavy brown woman, slowly rose to her feet, stood by the pale blue curtains at the window. Warm sunlight fell on her skin. The head with hair all around, the empty dead face drooped; her hands felt over shoulders arms hips body, she sunned herself. The tender creature approached trembling. “Now I’ll take you into my garden. You must stroll beneath my lovely elms. They’ve waited for you so long.”

And as she took her by the waist and led her through the French windows into the open air along the sandy path, the young creature trembled even more: “I’m ashamed to wear clothes at your side.” And after hiding her face in her hands for a moment, with a high-pitched whimper, let her gown fall, removed her stockings and flung her arms around Melise’s waist. “We’ll go here, I’ll show you. There’s no one in my garden. The women keep a good lookout.”

“Where are you taking me, Betise?”

“It’s my garden. Don’t be afraid. The sun’s hotter here than inside. We should be like our ancestors, who ran around in a hot land and the sun was the only thing that drew them.”

Later, as they walked in a meadow with red clover, the young snuggling thing trembling all the while, there came from Melise: “Who’s this at my side. See, it’s Betise. Aren’t you afraid of me?”

“Why should I be afraid of you?” She pulled Melise down onto the soft grass. “Do you know what I do because I, I am Melise?”

“You, Melise?”

“Yes.”

Melise’s black eyes flashed, her face became lively: “Yes, you be Melise. I like you. Go on, do it, do it to me,” she cried, “be Melise.”

“What should I do?”

“Whatever you want. If you can.”

Tears streamed down the young girl’s face. “Lie still. Lie still.” She turned the brown woman over like a log. The girl stroked her feet her hands, crawled about her. Watching Melise’s face she slid a ring from the little finger, the ring with which she killed her favourites. Now her arms were about Melise’s neck, she kissed her, caressed her cheeks with hers. “Persephone.”

“That’s not me.”

“Be her again. For me.”

“I can’t.”

“Just once more.”

“I can’t.”

“But I want it, Persephone. I must come to you.”

“I can’t. I am not Persephone.”

“Come on. Look at me.”

Melise opened her eyes, sat up. The heavy yellow-brown woman let herself be led through the garden. She went strong-shanked breast-swaying in Betise’s embrace; the wild black-haired head drooped to her breast. She sighed as she walked: “It’s burning. My feet are burning.”

“The sun’s hot here. Come to the stream. There’s the bridge. That’s where you want to go.”

“Melise,” the sweet delicate thing clung to the woman’s dangling arms as they sat by the water under the bridge, pressed the head to her throat groaning breast-deep in shadow: “What will you do?” Betise, sitting up in delight, let her hands face explore the queen’s body lying there full length, distracted. “I love you, I love you, Melise. All I want to say is that I love you. That I have waited for you such a long time, time without beginning or end. And that you are here. Give me your mouth, say: you are my sweetheart.”

“Your sweetheart,” the other murmured.

Betise: “Your sweetheart, that’s me, you throat you head and hair you wet hair you breast you arm your body here and here. Come, lovely eyes both, I want to make you better. You look sad. I must weep and cry when I see you. Don’t get up.” She pushed at the heavy body, a hand over Melise’s eyes and nose. Then she shouted: “I’m rolling you, rolling you, Melise,” and as she turned and rolled she stabbed the ring’s canula between her ribs. The slack body rolled helpless onto face onto back onto face, slid through grey weeds into the water. Melise’s head lifted snapping. The girl jumped after her, lay on her, pushed the head down, screamed her pain and fear: “Don’t open, eyes. You’re in the water, in the water. It’s good. I’ll sing to you. Hear me, Melise. I’m a linnet. You’re flying with me. Now, now, we’re flying so high, as far as my voice can reach. Higher. Ah, we’re flying to tremendous heights. Sweet Melise, I beg you, don’t make me cry

again. Your eyes won't open now." She lifted a hand from the water, kissed the wet fingers. "Enough, poor hand. You tremble so. I too. Enough." Scrambled back up the weedy bank, rubbed her face in the grass, chewed grass. "All a-tremble. My sweet queen, I did this to you." She crouched under the bridge, knees drawn up: "This bridge was the last thing your eyes ever saw. I'll stay here under the bridge. I see her lying there, smooth brown back, shiny legs. Water lapping at them. My sweet queen lying there. Oh I've done her a good deed."

She sat a long while, sometimes gazed at her fingers as they dried, stroked her hair: "Don't say that, don't say that. Why should I drown myself. I love her. There must be one left in the world who loves Melise. Let it all stay as it is: bridge shadows sun garden Melise. All stay as it is." Shadows deepened, Betise still there on the grass the clover: "They'll arrest me. They'll come looking for her. They won't catch me. I must stay alive. There must be one person alive who loves Melise. They mustn't kill her."

Tenderly she gave the brown cold wet body a last hug, threw the ring into the water, scurried from the bridge over the meadow's clover red primroses gentian. She slipped in through the open French windows, wiped dirt from her feet. Pulled gaily striped stockings onto her slim trembling legs, Melise's last gift to her, white blue long blouse, bright yellow silk gown like an overcoat. From a white cotton cloth she fashioned a cowl for her head. She blew kisses around her, into the twilit garden. And stepped calmly away from the silent house, past the many watchers Melise had posted, telling them: she's going because the queen told her to. Disappeared for ever, despite all the visible and invisible hunters sent in pursuit.

PART TWO:
THE URALS WAR

ASSAULT ON THE MACHINES

THE MASSES were sated, pampered. The search was on for new needs. More immigrant masses were allowed in, the townzones expanded. As the ruling class relaxed its iron grip, secrets were betrayed out of frivolity, boastfulness, in drink. Increasing numbers of wild fearsome characters appeared among them, others stupid ponderous tractable. Men and women, cronies in the ruling elite, quarrelled more violently. Then sallied forth again in common defence of their status, their machines.

Big dangerous brutal characters emerged not just from the ruling class, but from the teeming polymorphous masses too. At the end of the 24th century came the first desperate assaults on the machines. Tales were still told a century later of those mighty deeds. The direction was from peripheral populations towards the centre: Timbuktu against Rome, Sydney against San Francisco, North Africa against Messina Palermo. The insurgency and the reaction to it were most violent in outlying regions; never would power be wrested from the rulers in Milan, backed by London. But the instruments of power were themselves at risk. European remnants along the North African coast, having escaped the clutches of Europe, showed their strength. Suddenly in the dreamy humming cities agitators were on the loose, whipping up anger. Holograms showed mocking depictions of the life of Queen Melise and others. Look, Bordeaux Cathedral, her priests and priestesses, mercenary spears. Here again were the brutal murderous courts, men and women seized from the streets, their houses, fields. Destroy the stupid mighty machines, destroy the brains that gave birth to them.

In the countryside appeared men and women who, as if caught by the wind, pitted themselves against the heads from which the devices had sprung. In the strongest zones, through cunning, through lovers friends drinking companions, members of the ruling elite were cut down. Scythe and corn usually perished together: so savage was the urge to be rid of the devices that the assailants gave no thought to themselves. Often they fell asleep under the influence of cocaine and Brazilian narcotics, assassin and victim both. The ground beneath the devices sank away. The men and women who sacrificed themselves were beyond counting.

Targuniash and Zuklati were men who, lacking power and with no mass of people behind them, posed a direct challenge to the senates of their zones: hand over the machines, let the people vote on which devices to retain. The roving invisible Monitoring Committees and commissars could not identify them, for the two men spoke to no one, went undercover even in their own circles.

Antwerp and Calais experienced painful times. The two men holed up there. Hitherto unknown agents were rapidly penetrating to the most dangerous secrets. The flabby ruling class pulled itself together, paid attention: no more suspicious sudden deaths at table, no attacks from outside, traitors are among us. Commissars arriving from London found nothing. In Antwerp one day, all switchgear in the city centre was destroyed, the elite's defensive weaponry mostly disabled. The city lay exposed. Targuniash called for action. The astonished masses heard him, were in turmoil. When London appeared he went to ground. Targuniash continued burrowing. In vain. The elites flung new distractions at the masses. Then one day Antwerp's power plant came to a stop. By evening was still out of action. And next day, and the next. Targuniash's name was on everyone's lips. They found his charred body between the leads of the main generator: he had destroyed it with himself.

Zuklati met a similar end in Calais.

The rulers were deeply alarmed. They sat there, clueless.

Timbuktu spat desperate assassins at Rome. Two women who appeared in a profoundly unsettled San Francisco had come from strife-torn Sydney.

FLAGS

AFTER DECADES of assaults and repressions, the rising generation of the elite managed to turn things around. Older heads, mistrustful gloomy careworn barren, were all for throwing in the towel. So younger ones deposed replaced them. The young sensed a lost fatal situation. They set to work in an alliance that held in most capitals. They fell in with the masses, moved warily among them without hostility. The masses, seething but leaderless, welcomed the change with enthusiasm. At first a few zones were taken with the new spirit, then many more. In Europe, the breach of the elite dominance cemented by the Dunkirk Directive occurred with an abruptness that exposed tensions among the masses. The Monitoring Committees melted away along with their dreadful secrets. Knowledge was no longer kept hidden, senates were opened up. The motive force for these events was mysterious. And behind it – enticing insistent coercive – was the New.

And the New arrived as swiftly as the younger generation. Lively men and women, welcomed by the masses, moved through streets plants factories government buildings. Rode through every land, their appearance a cause for joy. They

were no less savvy than their elders.

For the first time in centuries, in the cities of France Germany Italy flags appeared on houses aeroplanes cars. Seemed to emerge from nowhere along with the new young leaders. Those elders still alive were amazed, entranced, fearful; uttered warnings.

Something momentous was about to happen. The flags of the new democracies that appeared so suddenly in London Paris Calais Berlin and quickly spread to every zone – greeted with such longing that women wrapped themselves in flags, public buildings as well as factories and homes draped flags across their frontages – were all of different designs, often an extravagant mishmash harking back to the national flags of old. But everywhere stars suns moons, silver white gold. The lively young men and women of the elite carried flags through the zones: the masses adopted this sun this moon these stars shining in an age-old sky. At the sight, millions of hearts on Earth beat faster. What moved them was no dream of spring, no love song. It did not make the head droop, not shape lips for a sigh, or make the face small, the legs heavy. Entranced, tensely expectant, they had no idea what they wanted.

But in their heart of hearts they knew: these are our emblems. No more subversion of senates, no more insults or attacks. People conspired with the emblems, were avid to show themselves to them.

At the moment when the celestial images on the flags made their appearance on the continents, the pressure-heads of water that turned the dynamos far from any population centres were working ever more strongly triumphantly. Special turbines in avenue-long works sang in tones high and deep like choirs. Distribution cables, rustling buzzing, emitted bass groans, squeals. Something coyly smiling flashed from the power plants down cables pipelines. The people of the cities who fussed about these ponderous monsters of machines, manipulated their levers and switches, hauled on control rods, had fallen in love with the iron beings. They felt at home amid the humming chattering clacking. It delighted and excited them, like a lovers' tryst.

After seething for a century in mistrustful isolation, after the proliferation and parochialism of cities and zones, a sense of unity arose over Europe, and soon over all three great continents. Energetic men and women from the alien masses, the enslaved, flocked to the new generation of ruling senatorial elites. The spirit took them so wildly that they were driven to destructive attacks on those who had for so long withheld this from them. In many places, as the elders had feared, the ruling class was eradicated. But these inconsequential acts had no impact on the course of events. The people who now flung themselves at the machines, who applied themselves to the mysteries of knowledge, were more passionate than those they replaced. Caressing, in tempestuous ardour, men and women crawled over the machines that now were theirs. Iron seemed to them no less imbued with soul than their own flesh.

As this wave broke over the continents, as the last of the elders gave everything up for lost and sank into their graves, one day in southern Germany a young woman appeared on the streets of a large townzone. Carried an enormous flag with the starry emblems. But on the flag were not only sun moon stars, but a fire as well, blazing out from stars that had been plucked like fruit, emitting big flames. She propped the flag against a tree in a square, and in front of the excited thousands pursuing her in a rapturous throng, jumped into the granite basin of a fountain. Water sprayed over her in the wind, her feet were in the basin. Dusky gentle round face brown eyes, she swung her slender arms, ripped open her shirt:

"How long will we go about, tread the streets, dust, stones? What for? Why are we here, why am I here? Don't you know? I know. We love iron; its strength is in us, stronger than in any other age. Once they shut it away from us. Now it is ours. Now we feel it. It is our blood our life. It is not the Earth. Why is the sun on our flags, moon stars. No sun moon stars. We! We! We! We people! Break away from the stars! Break away from the sun! We can do it! We have a brain in our heads. See there, our machines. Our flesh. I love them. What could be stronger. What could be stronger than us with them. My salvation. I cannot hold myself back. Come friends, boys and girls, to our strength! To our children, to our heart." The ecstatic crowd carried her with the flag to the nearest power plant. The workers grew nervous at the crowd's approaching roar. The giant flag that sought to seize their souls fluttered in the huge hall. The song of Targuniash the Liberator resounded. The woman cried out before a humming restless monster: "Targuniash the Liberator wanted to destroy the plants. We want to conquer them for ourselves. Our blood is with us. My salvation! We shall not hold back from them. To them! I must go to them!"

Amid the screams and swooning of men and women, mindless raving groans and cries, she jumped from the stone surround of the machine-carcase onto its flashing heaving iron-clanking body. The machine never missed a beat, hummed on imperiously in its stone surround. It rummaged in its bed, flung the woman's body about, anointed itself with gushing scarlet blood. It drowned the cries and horrified hush of the people. A man on the surround, crooked, face either laughing or crying: "Gone is gone. What is one body to a machine. How many must a machine devour before it becomes human. She can't believe one is enough, such a little drop for the lovely machine. Listen when I call out 'Hey'! How does the machine answer? Hey! Hey! I am nothing, the machine is louder. It takes more than one. Who'll join me on this journey. Come come come." He coaxed. They stood two three four, looked down from the surround. The little crooked man shouted: "Jump." They linked hands, were gone. The machine flung the bodies in an arc around itself as if spitting them out, until they fell back and it swallowed them. It purred for a moment as if rubbing its belly relishing, then thundered iron-raged on. Another woman, teeth chattering, hoisted the flag by its pole. She was a big woman, held the flag before her, face anxious, knees trembling; she stepped onto the surround. "No more now. Leave the machine in peace. It's digesting. Enough for today." The machine roared so thunderously that they fled.

They were tolerated in many cities. They leapt at the spoils. The flags of young liberators fluttered over the zones,

carried the gaze away from fields streets factories. It glided like a worm to men and women who felt it; slid into arms from the touch of tools, the sight of a factory, human chatter, gestures, lifted them up, held them to its own breast, squeezed knees together, feet ankles closed, pressed chin to breast so that they stood and made themselves free again, shook themselves, flung themselves about.

All around the great installations wharves factories, around aircraft hangars, alongside railway tracks, benighted people went hot darkskinned white pale, squinted, were overcome, turned about, lamented: “What should we do?” They wore work-clothes, loose or tight. Those who had leisure donned baggy jackets, draped capes over the shoulder, floppy hats scarves, paraded these along riverbanks and walls. Cringed: “Don’t hurt us. What must we do. Tell us. Bring your mouth close to our ears. How it grinds us in the chest; how small we are. No, we are big. Show us where to jump, we’ll jump.” Braced: “Where is redemption.”

They suffered under their confusion of love passion destructive rage. The apparatus they loved must be destroyed. In many places they did so. They were no different from the men and women, members of the ruling elite, who at that time came visible or invisible in their veils and shadows up behind them, grabbed them by the neck, dragged them away for sentencing and obliteration. They dangled from hands that gripped them tight, were one with them, laughed twisted flounced raged: “Kill us. What difference does it make. It won’t change us.” The bodies dragging them, the shadows visible and invisible, cried: “Why do you desecrate our blood. Why our blood. You must tell us.” From those who dangled in their hands, laughing writhing: “What would you know. We’re ahead of you. You’ll kill us, take our lives. We’re grateful.” They were not thrown into machines, lest it impair their functioning. No steel was used, lest it feel besmirched and offended. They sought out cliffs waters swamps, pools in rivers, flung them in, drowned them. “Oh, if only I had more hands,” cried the judges. “Oh if only I had more bodies,” the obliterated. Rage and ecstasy in both.

What was happening to men and women. Just as a thousand times they had risen side by side without fighting, borne by passion and confusion towards a common goal, so now they kept contact a thousand times with fingertips, with thumbs ankles elbows shoulders. Fingers pulled away, cramped clenched. Thumbs extended, digging in. Elbows spraddled, braced, snapped shut like hinges, banged like doors. Shoulders were like water. Water is soft. If you grasp at water it escapes, is not there, covers the fingers and is there and is not gone, has swallowed fingers hands knuckles. Shoulders felt the touch of hands, dipped like switches under the pressure of fingers, lurched like a boat from side to side, swooped like swifts down to the water’s surface. Struck out left, right. They were like reeds in the wind, now bowed, now erect, calmly waving. Spraying like milk from a spout, emerging soaked to the core. The shoulders – until their muscles seized jerked turned to stone, and it was life or death. Neither species wanted the other weaker. Each desired that the other be stronger. So you could grasp it ever tighter more savagely more terribly in an iron grip, and let it be your ruin.

NO INDIVIDUAL WAS AN INCENDIARY

IT BEGAN in Italy. Suddenly the zones were full of mobs loosed from factories settlements. They claimed to be spirits of machines devices, poured into districts towns wild, half-crazed. Bare chests painted black blue red with cogwheels. Flapping giant flags overhead, with sun moon stars; flames leaping from the stars. More and more often the flames came not from stars but out of the darkness around them. A fiery glow reached to the sky, enveloped the blanched emblems. The darkness was but a cloud, sometimes a head a breast the black space between two uplifted human hands, flames between them leapt crackled surged swelled up, sideways, licked down.

These people were murderous incendiaries. They moved spontaneously. None dared challenge them as they tramped with sinister menace through Germany France Italy Ireland. On the east coast of America they destroyed small settlements. Then they turned large parts of Chicago Washington to ashes. They arrived like a blizzard, like the armyworm eating bare the ground beneath. Crossed mountains, thought nothing of desert wastes. Among them no individual was a murderer incendiary. Always they became what they were when they merged in a driven wandering foaming surging mob. Each one melting into it.

They tramped proudly past rivers that they dried up ripped apart diverted. The only task for the heavy equipment they brought along was to seize hold of earth and sky. They sought out resistance. With two three flamethrowers they razed groves and forests that stood in their way, stomped across a hot denuded landscape. Any babes that were born were cast aside by reluctant mothers. These people were dying of themselves, for in the end they became their own target. Their power must be revealed to them as well. Mass sacrifice became mass suicide. The flame-flags gazed down grim and challenging onto the regions below. The sound of their flapping aroused more than a war cry. The flags called men and women from their houses. You must line up, march in file as if to war. And then you fling yourself at foreign zones, smash through forests, rip rivers apart, step close, man and wife, wrestle each other down, the cord in your hand is around your own neck, knife in your own hand; the rays you yourself set up are directed at your own painted breast, sweaty forehead, passionate expectant eyes.

For years the tide of murderous incendiaries and suicidal mobs ebbed and flowed across the west. Until from their own numbers a power emerged that annihilated them. Inka Stochod, a Pole, dammed the wave which once had carried him along. With a handful of loyal supporters, one Pentecost day in eastern Germany he killed a number of the most turbulent people around him, who had already agreed to sacrifice themselves. Stochod took their lives before they could. He spread the news to nearby mobs in Silesia and Moravia, swept them up, dealt with them. With a few more blows Stochod, bringing in people and weapons from Berlin Hamburg, choked off the agitation in eastern and central Germany. Wavering senates in the southern German zones were supported against their mobs. Stochod reported to London the pacification of central Europe, even as Scandinavians and Italians spoke helplessly of the terror menacing their regions.

At the London conference, Stochod met Arsen Yorre from Lyon. Stochod with his wavy medieval locks, in the colourful showy costume of his time, fur hat and jaunty plume, a heavy man always laughing, he who had torn free of terrible urges, who fizzed with fun, applauded himself with fleshy hands, blinked slyly from yellow eyes. He embraced Yorre, sinewy ironcast man from southern France just embarking on what Stochod had already accomplished. They vowed to help each other.

Within a few weeks Yorre, working outward from Lyons, had defeated the fanatical destroyers. Outside Paris, where remnants of the mobs had barricaded themselves in, he appeared with a fabulous retinue. For two days he camped outside the city. Long-distance weapons from Paris could not harm him. At his back was all the knowledge of London America Germany. He welcomed anyone who wanted to inspect his positions. In Paris itself, the madness of murder and suicide did not abate: Yorre let it burn itself out. His massed forces stayed horrified outside the city, as behind its impotent masts and magnetic rays there burned the fires that had been driven back from the plains. In those outside it twitched still, they tensed their muscles, suppressed it.

WIND AND WATER THEORY

IN THE MID-25th century there emerged Wind and Water Theory. A few brains among the masses – among them Surrur in Edinburgh, by descent a Guato from Paraguay, and the Norwegian Sörensen – pointed to examples of intense purpose and almost mechanistic cooperation in the animal kingdom. There each creature follows a quite specific work instinct that benefits all: gathering stalks, masticating fungi, constructing honeycombs. Such things are accomplished smoothly by each group or worker-type according to its ability, impersonal, instinctual, a reflex. Compared to this, they said, the fragmented human condition cannot count as progress. It is wrong to lead a private life, tolerate individualism.

They explained that in order to be persons, it would be enough for a certain rather small number of humans to dedicate themselves to the performance of a specific function, to think to plan. Furthermore it would be in the interest of humanity to fix the vast masses in a steady-state permanent condition, to remove from them the individual life which anyway they had never lived, to reduce them to a vegetable sameness. The consistency and happiness of individual lives would thereby be guaranteed. For certainly it was not through teaching or private efforts that an individual could attain happiness or be saved from disaster. They pointed to the chaos, the notorious aimless instability of world history. The root cause of all the ups and downs, the rise and fall of great empires, was the well-intentioned efforts of individuals and peoples to achieve something by themselves. But the masses are split into classes and cliques, all the way down to the individual; something flows to this one, something to that one, there is no common understanding, people fight, therein lie the seeds of decline. The homogenisation of the masses must take precedence over every other task. A soldier is satisfied with serving, he's beyond good or bad luck. If he leaves the ranks, goes off with a few comrades or to a family, he becomes unstable, unfit for purpose, dangerous.

The Wind and Water Theory of Sörensen and Surrur pointed to the homogeneity of the particles that compose water and air. Only a fantasist could claim that water-persons and air-persons exist. Myriads of wholly identical particles clump together to form air or water – entities more powerful than states and mobs, and incredibly resilient. Surrur, who was credited with extraordinary developments in the technology of synthetic foodstuffs, asserted with solemn emphasis in Edinburgh: the only way left for humanity is to become either a solitary animal, or a vegetable mass. The solitary animal is impossible. That leaves the vegetable mass. Result: the end of history, the human species stabilised. This would be achieved in his view by a state breeding programme lasting centuries, by biological interventions, in particular relating to food.

Such theories gave expression to something already stirring among the European populace; they were irrepressible, as would later be proved, would surface again and again, they accorded with the deep-seated drives of a harassed entity.

Women found it easiest to submit to the stern ideal of a homogeneous mass. In those days no one advocated moderation. Merciless winnowing and discarding was a self-evident necessity. Protections for the weak were deliberately neglected. The unfortunate were not pitied but despised. An atavistic sense of humanity disappeared. Everywhere on the edges of big cities there persisted organisations led by descendants of the old ruling clans, which refused to abandon the

care of the sick the old the invalid. In many zones over many decades they were proscribed, survived only in deepest obscurity under assumed names. And it was the teeming incoming masses in particular who hated these welfare societies, often stormed their premises and wrecked them. Their only inspiration the glamour of the machines, the desire to promote their power: women thrived on it. The stereotype of the weak western woman disappeared. The new generation of women hated nothing more than that kind of tender female who once delighted a man. They mistreated her, made her their servant, humiliated her cruelly, and after a few generations the type was no more.

As the family became defunct, women came together, took the initiative in the care and upbringing of infants and small children. They were as dispassionate and cold as men, and more brutal. They lived in huge sororities that spread across the biggest townzones, and were present too in factories, where men now had to defend themselves from women as much as from other men. The fraternities men formed could not compete with the sororities.

Women used their female leagues to assign duties and ration births. They were conscious of the price their gender paid in pregnancy birth the suckling of infants. They aimed to minimise these disadvantages, turn a woman's capacity to bear children from a weakness to a strength. Women alone, over a long period, determined who and how many should be subjected to childbearing. For it was clear that one less birth meant one less fighting unit.

At this point the tired old question of human eugenics was for the first time answered, as a by-product of the solution to another problem. Women supplied strong incontrovertible self-serving examples of child-production, in the expectation they would not be broken by the birthing process and would yield sturdy children on whom no superfluous energy need be wasted. Facilities for mother-females, developed by women in every city once the family became extinct, were the only ones with a veneer of humanism, among the best-protected social constructs of the age. Women alone, and for a long time only those of the sororities, determined and named the men singled out for fatherhood. Fruits of unknown origin were ruthlessly destroyed.

If this age of western humanity had lasted longer, the dominion of women would have been secured. For after the disappearance of the gentle to-and-fro between male and female, child-bearing was the most powerful weapon to use against men; it was in women's hands, and they quickly grasped it. Women could still be raped, but they could not be forced to give birth. It was in their power to reduce the number of males. Already in the sororities the thought was harboured of retaining only a small number of male children. They planned to await the onslaught of more masses of foreign immigrants, and then deploy this weapon mercilessly. Already there were stories from northern townzones, which had absorbed slower waves of migrants, of women having the upper hand in senates, of birth-politics leading to forced polyandry.

And then the cornucopia of suddenly emerging discoveries and inventions, the progress pursued with such relentless passion, brought an end to all these plans.

LIGHT PAINT

MORE FRANTICALLY than ever, at the end of the 25th century and the beginning of the next there emerged the spectre of devastating progress. Inventions undermined whole industries, emptied a dozen flourishing cities as if by war. Neighbouring states had to take in the migrating hordes, to avoid being overwhelmed by a belligerent flood.

The invention of Light Paint, for example, generated furious resistance. In gloomy Helsinki the secret of the paint was discovered by a man who had wrestled doggedly with the fluorescence of fluorite, sodalite, of beryl. Mrs Garner, whose slave he was, or friend or assistant, seized on Tikkanen's dreamily enthusiastic ideas. For years she worked assiduously, saying nothing to Tikkanen. When she admitted him to her secluded experimental laboratory, sprayed a canister onto the door the wall beside him, and with no apparatus that the calmly waiting man could see let prepared gas bottles breathe on the moistened wall, to his immense wonder a brightness swelled around him, greenish, then reddish, yellow, finally a white that absorbed every object shape colour. His awe was boundless.

When the woman revealed to Tikkanen the analysis of the spray, he understood. Sadness dawned in him. He gave voice to it as they discussed how to improve and simplify the method: basically, the discovery seemed to him related to an observation he had made on a beach on the island of Smölen. He smiled discreetly at the thought. She had been waiting for that smile. Without a word she and he continued the research together. She challenged him to enhance the luminosity when the light-mass impacted plant or animal tissue. The dogs they employed reacted as expected: they coughed. The man did not long outlive the dogs.

A decade later the substance was ready. It required large numbers of skilled specialist workers and special factories. Elbowed aside a hundred factories that produced lights, light conductors, light boosters. It had come to this: no one was safe from inventions that leapt out from ambush onto humankind. The sporadic arrival of new inventions was like the epidemics of earlier centuries that had ravaged humanity, emptied cities. Factories installations towns regions were selected by supra-territorial cartels, mostly in London-New York, according to the needs of the new inventions, and

people brought from all corners of the globe to service them. Until yet more progress cast them aside, caused them to vanish. On the Continent hundreds of thousands were on the move. When they flooded menacing uprooted into neighbouring cities and regions, dependent on their charity, they demanded protection from inventions, from the cartels.

Local senates, long reduced to insignificance, took up the call. They allied with the masses, swore to resist any foreign military or technological assault that threatened the demise of their townzone. Now the zones, grown prouder than ever, stood on their own two feet. The long-dissipated power of the great clans was revived. The zones had in some degree to de-develop themselves, achieve more diversity in work and production, in order not to be ruined by a single shock. The tamed masses conducted themselves peaceably in the zones; were allowed to shout: “Down with new inventions!” Their hostility made it easier for the new rulers to reintroduce quotas for incoming technologists and scientists, and to secure their own position. A circle of cities and regional zones emerged. London, ever watchful, kept a close eye on them.

But the rulers of the cities, handed great power by popular support, sat there scornful and arrogant, men and women both, and laughed. Laughed at the trust the people placed in them; of course they’d help to ensure that the ground the cities stood on would not be undermined by new inventions. Laughed: “We won’t let them undermine you. If only you knew what ground it is you stand on.”

At that time evangelists from sects and churches of all kinds ran around in the zones, warned against progress, against the shameless global cartels and their destructive impact. They warned, when they saw strong men and women reappear in the leadership of towns and regions, about these kin of Melise of Bordeaux, the ever-recurring evil; none could imagine how power, the hellish monster that had consumed her, would work away in them. The elites beamed. Provided universal security work glamour.

SYNTHETIC FOOD

WITH THE synthesis of artificial foodstuffs in the 26th century, an unprecedented global change of course set in. It transformed every condition of life, and necessitated a reversion to the strictest regime of government. No well-meaning objections could counter the force of this necessity. The keenest promoters and opponents of the dreadful development came to prominence from among the masses. The leading senates had avidly supported the project; its success threw them into turmoil. When the first happy results were obtained after decades of trials they were shocked, at first called a halt to the work, wanted to start over, held back the results. The invention must not be revealed, the researchers must be confined to their own circles. For decades in Chicago and Edinburgh the experimental arrays lay ready which, if activated, were bound to have a catastrophic impact on the way human beings lived together.

They had not simply followed a path of inorganic synthesis, but worked outward from plant and animal organisms. Ultramicroscopic observations and ultrafine measurements of living organs had, after enormous difficulties wrong tacks, after exhausting work by battalions of chemists physicists physiologists, achieved clarity about change-processes in living bodies. It required major advances in physics, in the construction of ultramicroscopes, apparatus for electrical measurements. Alice Layard in Chicago, a beautiful white woman, contributed decisively to the measurement and automatic charting of ancillary micro-electrical and heat processes in organic cells. The unveiling of the complex mechanisms of assembly and disassembly lay now within reach.

Physicists and chemists were emancipated from animal and plant life. For a long time, reluctantly, with a half-laugh, thoughts of famine had surfaced: a single dry summer could inflict it on an entire region; absurd human thraldom to heat and drought. These chemists and physicists hated nothing so much as a green field of crops, meadows, the grotesque assemblage of a herd of cattle. As in earlier ages, slaughterhouses sausage-shops bakeries still obtruded into daily life. Bakeries: already mentioned on ancient Assyrian tablets.

In the townzone of Edinburgh, great Meki headed the leading laboratory. Two hundred selected personnel worked there. For years on end no one left the zone, unless they were occupied only with inconsequential sub-routines. Meki, a member of the Edinburgh Senate, was constrained by the Senate to watch his colleagues closely, not flinch from interning them on the slightest suspicion.

People spoke then and later of Meki’s Green Round Table. All his men and women wore identical green uniforms. All two hundred sat at tables in the refectory in the big residential building behind the institute. In the horseshoe-shaped space formed by their tables stood smaller tables, at which purple-clad people ate and drank: these were called guests. If someone said “guest”, a newcomer to the institute would curl the upper lip in a smile; older colleagues would frown. For these were human sacrifices, used for experiments once they reached a specific stage. They looked like anyone else; their appearance gradually changed; they were replaced. The Senate sent people to them as needed, never anyone uneasy or nervous, no one harbouring suspicions, but always a random selection from those willing to help, who believed they were being inducted into secrets.

But they were not inducted, those hundred people who wondered about the daily weight checks, the temperature-taking, ushering into a gas chamber. They offered no objection, for they could see that green-clad colleagues also underwent weighing and checking. They walked with the others in the woods, ran, played games, but always some went missing. They did not see the hospital lying far to the rear with its thousand beds for humans, next to the stables for sick horses and dogs. For so many sick piled up from time to time. They lay isolated in private rooms; no one ever spoke to the others; and any who recovered were transferred to Chicago, near Alice Layard's facility, which Edinburgh wanted to keep an eye on.

Meki's Purples also knew nothing of the big strange cemetery. Little concrete cellars were dug into the ground, and brightly lit. If you went down the steps, there before a deeply scalloped wall stood an array of flasks glasses retorts, their openings either stoppered or fitted with taps through which gaseous matter flowed hissing in and out. Small humming ventilator fans drew the cellar's acrid sour air out through a flue. Each flask and beaker was labelled; a great ledger full of notations was chained to the wall. For the Purples were harassed even after death: changes in their organs once interactions with other organs had ceased were investigated further. The Greens were never indifferent when one of these died and lost what was casually termed their "soul", their "life". From the refectories and laboratories they strolled to the cemetery, made more measurements of heat, drew off fluids, added substances, regulated gas flows, ran electric current, sent rays surging through inert body parts.

The Purples never knew what was being done to them. They thought they were living eating breathing drinking just like the others. But they ate pretend food, drank pretend drinks; in their rooms, their secure rooms set well back, they breathed air saturated with secret substances. What was set before them in the horseshoe-shaped space between the chattering tables of Greens looked like chops, tasted like sauces wine cakes coffee chocolate. Now and again, at the start almost always, the chop the sauce were actually there, a vehicle for the experimental material. Later, only pretend food was presented: gelatinous masses that looked like meat, with meat's toughness or the consistency of liver. These were enriched with whatever substances were currently under investigation.

They went about the woods rooms halls, these Purples, the guests, young men and women of every race, as if it were nothing. Now and then some would be fetched away of an evening, a man and a woman. Two or three Greens would be in the silent bedroom, would look at the being who stood upright, having dropped its clothes to the floor, would ask the female the male: are you ready to sacrifice a limb. The being would start, and cry out, would at once be sedated. Or it would slowly lower its head, look from one Green to another, ponder and ask tremulous questions. There were many who did not cry out, but pondered and questioned. They accepted every explanation. "Why not? Why not?" came from clenched teeth, "if you can manage it." And they went flanked by Greens, bowels loosening, stumbling and distracted, steered along corridors. "Nothing to do with me. Show me what you can do."

And as if it were they who had set it all up, their eyes swept triumphantly over the dazzling white-tiled observation hall, the tables on which devices stood, the curious glass caskets almost like coffins in which lay people and linen-covered assemblages of limbs that moved, flexed fingers, gripped. They took the scene in with delight. Humming buzzing all around. A strange heat wafted everywhere, came from gaps in the glass caskets in which people, surrounded by tubes and wires, washed by fluids, lay with eyes closed, brightly lit, chest visibly rising and sinking. Soon they too, swelling with joy, wore an enrapturing mask over mouth and nose. All around them in glass cabinets, in caskets waterbeds, temperatures ranging from the coolness of soil to a high heat, pale and ruddy organs and organ parts lay covered or bare on cotton wool, floated in harnesses. Standing jars pumped nutrient transfusion serum through narrow tubes. This serum trickled through the bodies the muscles of the unconscious dormant opened-up people, men and women from Uganda from Cape Town London, from wherever it was they had been herded here. Everywhere monitoring apparatus had been inserted into the living organisms, living organs, pulsing organ parts. Greens went here and there, took cell samples, carried them in dishes to other caskets. Enormously tall glass cylinders, in which pale red-veined intestines moved slowly like worms in their mesenteric tissue, either severed from or connected to the organism. Substances were sprayed dusted painted, changes observed in the oozing mucous membrane, the thin intestinal wall. Many of the people had had their skulls opened, the hairy scalp lay beside them, the protruding pulsing brain in a warm liquid bed. Blue bulging veins curled thickly over the pale convoluted mass; it had been opened up, wires and little tubes inserted deep within it. Wires and little tubes led as well to the intestines, the blood, the liver. Everything was connected to gleaming metal devices, transmitting registering. Men and women in face masks went on rubber soles through the spaces where no sound could be heard apart from an occasional songlike moan from a glass casket.

Heavy metal walls, movable, separated the tiled spaces from strongly walled spaces where plants, trees low and tall, grew in beds mounds of earth. These too were enmeshed in a confusion of wires and little tubes. They were split open, bored through; connectors were let into crowns stems roots. In some lofty rooms a cool breeze blew; in others the air lay heavy; red green phosphorescence glimmered on the plants.

In small and inconspicuous sombre workshops in side rooms and cellars, in vats, steaming cauldrons and cabinets, the main work of the facility was done: the emulation and reconstruction of the observed processes, first with copious living tissue from animals and plants in the neighbouring rooms, then with ever smaller amounts. The assistive fluids and cells were reduced to an absolute minimum; it went so far that Meki said he needed no more living substance for a type of fat or protein group than the brewer in olden days needed hops for his beer. In actual fact Meki never succeeded in doing entirely without organic material. And the work that represented the first step in the practical development of the enterprise was the fitting out of giant hangars for the conservation and breeding of specific cell materials from animal

and plant bodies.

In the end, little long-bearded Meki – a sceptic philosopher with eyes that blinked, and when he spoke he looked down at the floor beside you – had a building constructed in the forested grounds of the facility, a long way from the laboratories and quarters, which to the delighted surprise of his uninitiated assistants was exactly like a factory. They watched as apparatus they had used on organs in the halls of the living and in the cemetery rooms was transferred to the hundred cell-like spaces in the building. They brought drums of chemicals, set up gas emitters. They saw how the spaces, floor by floor, comprised a unity, how substances flowing from one space to the next always with a change of temperature were following a path, here lingering, there passing swiftly through, became altered as they mixed smelted dissolved with others. This small building surrounded by gardens and walls, completely windowless, receiving air through intakes in just one room, this light-proofed air-proofed building was filled with a cacophony of snuffling tootling rumbling noises. When you approached from outside, it purred in every cranny like an angry beast; to exclude all light the external walls were clad in a continuous sheath of black glass.

When reports first trickled through to Chicago about the synthesis of artificial food, the extreme agitation this occasioned in the city led New York and London to alert allied states and townzone leagues to the dangers of rash decision-making, and caution against an overhasty rollout of the technology. But since Chicago had been moving forward independently, and Alice Layard had declared publicly that she already had the means to nourish whole populations decade after decade without the need for fields or sun, the only recourse was to minimise as far as possible the risks of the new invention.

Alice Layard was a leading figure in the North American sororities. Sorority members pointed out to her what a fearsome weapon women would have in their hands if they were to reserve the synthesis to themselves; they meant to prompt Alice, capricious being, to keep the technology secret and make Chicago the core of a matriarchal state. Alice, however, could not deny herself her triumph over millions of men; she could not keep quiet. But in the Chicago Senate she was soon alone against the men. This she could not tolerate. She demanded influence again in her sorority; but the women's support came with hostility. Then she played one of those tricks that women are often said to use: she turned up at her sorority, spoke darkly of misunderstandings around herself and her actions; soon all would be clearer. Then for months nothing was heard of her.

In the region around the Chicago townzone, to which an unprecedented flow of people was making its way, the artificially nourished began to fall sick. Meki was summoned by the Senate to Chicago to explain the process. Meki was a cool customer, used to swift action. From afar he had suspected beriberi or scrofula; but when he saw the people in the streets or in their houses, the thousands struck down by fits and paralysis, it became clear to him that foul deeds were afoot to discredit the process. The toxic stages of certain protein bodies had always been held back. His observations, to his astonishment, revealed Alice Layard as the witting saboteur of his work. He found the lovely pale woman with the keen mind resting in her apartment; she was distraught, depressed, unwilling to talk. She was brought down not by the disaster she had caused, but by the vengeful hardness of those of her own gender, who now also rejected her. The Chicago Senate, disturbed and deeply aggrieved by information on the case, had this lovely woman beaten to death in her apartment by five Blacks. Women said nothing.

UPSETS AND DISTURBANCES

NOT LIKE rainwater directed from a sprinkler onto a parched field of beets, but like a bull led down a lane, restrained left and right by iron staves: thus, prodding restraining, did the great western townzones in the second third of the 26th century unleash this monstrous innovation on their people. No event before or since so welded together senates new ruling elites, gave them the strength of rock. Now people would find out what they were. Everyone saw the great example set by England, wise experienced queen-leader of the human masses, who had treated the great Meki as Spain once treated the much inferior Christopher Columbus: imprisoned him for almost ten years in his Edinburgh facility. Released to attend a conference in London, Meki took his own life.

London understood the necessity for monopoly control of the secrets of the synthesis and facilities, and that with this would come unprecedented power. While sister-city New York dithered, London's calm silent men and smiling women had already constructed facility after facility in Wales and Cornwall. And while senates on the continents advised delaying tactics, rationing the mass rollout, suddenly one May day the London Senate announced the menacing news to all its directly controlled and allied zones, released the number and locations of the strongly defended factories, named Meki, the fabled dead man, and ordered memorials to be erected in every large centre on the anniversary of his suicide.

The Senate coolly allowed this blow to whistle down on its European and African regions. It pointed out the very limited workforce needed in the production of synthetic sugar fat meat-tissue; pushed internally to secure control of the innovation, and externally to turn the substances created by science into pleasing products for all; declared a new era for

the work of humanity: this triumph had lifted a burden from a mankind striving for freedom and dignity.

London knew there would be upsets and disturbances in its zones of influence; also that it would end up master of the situation. Continental states and great townzones watched where London was going, its determination, looking centuries ahead, to show weaker daughter-states what path to follow: absolute possession of the levers of power by a trusted clique. Turbulence erupted in the zones ruled by England in the British Isles and Africa.

Within a few weeks tumult enveloped regions devoted to agriculture and livestock rearing, notably in southern Africa when powerful zones halted the summer migration of cattle to high pastures; when granaries were no longer guarded, doors left open, flour spilling by the sackful over the courtyard. In many places hardly a decade passed before great mill complexes appeared, constructed on new principles; they covered the area of a large village, were surrounded by playgrounds houses shopping malls. Granaries were allowed to close down, were then set on fire by idle mobs who left their homes, gravitated to large centres in search of a goal. The urban zones themselves were undermined, the halls of great factories lay deserted.

Out into the world flooded those who had lived on the land, the peasantry scattering, waves of men and women who had provided iron tools for the fields, had smelted annealed forged trimmed cooled polished. In this heaving humanity swirled a tumult of feelings. No one went short of food, no one could claim they were deprived, yet they bled, were recalcitrant, glowered when they were driven from the oven, let the mill stand idle. They would be told, so they learned in the centres, what it was they should do; they would want for nothing. And initial doubts were laid to rest by the fact: iron wagons laden with barrels and sacks still rolled up to the same sheds where flour was once unloaded. Even as granaries were sacked and torched by howling mobs with no resistance from the senates, indeed clearly with their approval, bakery shelves groaned under lavish displays of bread and cakes. London had advised the senates to hand out free flour for several weeks, in order to strengthen the impact and enhance the disorienting force of its blow. Big market halls for butter oil edible fats offered synthetic goods; to promote the changeover, these looked in shape and colour just like the natural product, though of a firmer consistency.

Laughing white black brown people went arm in arm through the market halls of English and South African centres. People thought they were in Cloud-Cuckoo Land. “They have synthetic animals, they can make trees!” Only the meat-like toughened gelatine, the vehicle for proteins, was mocked. What was trucked everywhere out of the factories in the form of sliceable brown and pink globs, some liver-like, some bone-like, softening when cooked, sometimes turning to mush, was spat out as unsuited to strong teeth that like to rip and tear, cheek muscles that need to chew and grind. Tastes drifted away from animal muscle. A period of grace was given to livestock breeders herders, until they too gave way to Meki-meat. A gourmet dessert was now the boiled roast baked steamed flesh of real birds fish cows shelled creatures.

Fields abandoned, those vast expanses tended tilled loved through millennia by generation after generation. Jungles had been cleared, ensnaring vines pulled down.

Wild beasts had been shot, tawny lion panther. Termites had been expelled, streams diverted, huts built, solid houses, villages with dogs, sheds for hens geese cows. In southern zones were regions that had been cleared deforested only a century or two earlier. Northmen in their iron glory had come, had torn ripped throttled the land, devoured mangled chewed plants and roots. Stones buried in the soil had been lifted and dumped in rubble heaps. In the black bed left behind by the corpses of trees and plants, they had sown pale delicate seeds by the million. The ground welcomed these, the seeds pushed green tips above the surface. Wide green fields, dense forests of stalks, ears of grain waving gently in the breeze. There they lay, beside the barns sheds living quarters that now were emptying. People returned to the vast cities. They encysted themselves in the cities. Left most of the Earth to itself. The soil rested.

Stalks grew wild, faded; bright flowers, once called weeds, proliferated among them, animals crept in, field-mice hopped about in the open. The age-old ground lay silent under the alternating lights of heaven, winds heat thunder pouring rain. Draped its nakedness with flowers plants animals, curled like a hedgehog.

AN ENEMY WAS SOUGHT

THE GAME started by London was taken up by other centres. Within a decade the clique of great ruling clans had forged its iron grip on western populations.

Now the grim passionate struggle of the workers could come to an end. From now on the western peoples, almost all swallowed by the cities, would forever be divided into a small active class and an idle mass. Membership in these groups changed according to inclination and need. The ever-growing mass of unemployed had to be kept occupied with entertainments and make-work. The uniformity of the species soon developed into a chaotic diversity. The rulers had available a large staff of experts and pretend parliaments to attend to the diversions.

The great townzones continued to grow. Constant streams of migrants, waves washing endlessly back and forth. The 27th century, fateful century for western populations, had dawned. Such seething discontented churning. Dangerous

apathy, erupting suddenly and turning everything rotten.

Nothing occurred in isolation. In London, the multitudes that served the machines and the industrial cartels wilted visibly under the same mood as those in Paris Berlin New York. Wild excitement, violent enthusiasms drained away. Enticements that once occupied them were now ignored in mistrust indifference. Pageantry sports partying held little attraction. Fashionable pretty titillating seductive items, made by machines, were laid out for people who silently turned down their mouths. There was a swirl of old forgotten costumes. Populations, mixed, got to know themselves, like tired little children who retreat to the corner and start to suck their thumb. Germans took up the heavy Bible, leafed through the hymn book, sang mournfully in forests. Swarthy brown people in the southern zones sank into lassitude: a sense of rich nourishing landscapes revived in them; the feeling drifted through them like smoke in rain, always beyond their grasp, left them unsettled. Arabian tribes, drawn into the seething devouring maelstrom of western peoples, were freed of the spell cast by the devices, the roaring machine-halls. From hooded eyes they regarded the silent countryside, mounted horses. The machines kept working. Waterfalls sped their high voltages across seas mountains into the cities. It was as if the connection had been cut by a hostile force that must be repelled.

The enormous masses that saturated the cities almost convulsively after the release of Meki's invention settled around the nutrition works, and degenerated. Crowds of workers, weary like them, emerged as always from the factories, blinking, taciturn. Astonishing entertainments were laid on in cities, flower and livestock breeding shows around the cities; few were attracted.

The masses in every western population centre grew fatter lazier, were given to exotic violent moody spasms. A subterranean rancour swelled in every centre; here whites, there blacks, there sleek brown-yellow people who built temples mosques churches, prayed half-heartedly to obscure gods, never really fell for the itinerant preachers and prophets. In some places, not enough people could be found willing to set foot in the factories.

Lassitude enveloped every zone, together with a curious gloom. As people sank deeper and deeper into an unspeakable sense of surfeit, ancient hatreds re-emerged among the remnants of ethnic groups living side by side. It was Bogumil Leuchtmar from the Hamburg townzone and a group of young men and women Regents who came up with the idea. The Wieshinska woman, his former co-regent in Heraklopolis, the Silesian zone given its start by Berlin, was with him; a woman called Azagga, dominant in the Bavarian city-region; also Uru from Palermo and Dongod Dulu from the principal Egyptian centre. They all understood, as they gathered with Wieshinska in Heraklopolis, that they must initiate a slow change of course, or new breakthroughs. In them was the power of the devices, the joy of the machines' prancing bull-pride; it dwelled in them like a palm tree striving for height and crown.

The Italian Uru fell victim to Wieshinska; the mocking woman had to bring to his senses this ebullient creature who wanted to join her retinue of male underlings. There was laughter among the five Regents in Heraklopolis when stocky Uru appeared at a meeting in the blue-yellow shawl of Wieshinska's male harem. He had stolen the shawl; Wieshinska tore it off him. For a moment ancient gender wars flickered in the little group; Wieshinska assumed that Uru had meant to mock her; the men secretly preened themselves at the sight of the woman's discomfort. Ten apt words and the current was diverted. They had no need to wander through Heraklopolis to understand that the infrastructure of production must stay in place, untouched worshipped deified.

They took up the blazing flags.

As Bogumil Leuchtmar, Wieshinska of Heraklopolis, Azagga, Uru and Dongod Dulu flew over the north German plain – landscape after landscape emptied, grumbling seething masses of humanity driven in amongst the serried ranks of housing and inconspicuous observation and security posts – the masses did not yet sense their fate. Like people chained to one another by rivalry in love, inseparable only to tear torment bite one another, they still slouched, heads bowed, past the camouflaged protected locations of the devices, ready to attack ready to love ready to embrace. Nothing was uncertain to the Regents flying overhead. The flag with the stars and the flames flew outside all their installations.

They never reached London, to which they had been invited. They stopped in Brussels. It was Leuchtmar who curtailed the trip. It was he who, even before they landed, suddenly hauled in the flag, ripped it, let the ragged shreds fall. The others were already in Brussels while he floated irresolute through the air, circled the city as far as the North Sea, approached drew back as if clearing a path through undergrowth. He seemed to be travelling across a vast moorland, lost. Just as lost – they met as if by arrangement – as Rallignon in Dunkirk. On the site of the conference where four centuries earlier the Milan Incident had handed unlimited power to the ruling clans of the states and zones, they walked side by side, avoided eye contact. For Rallignon, too, was thinking of war.

Thoughts of war had risen up in them, intoxicating. They imbibed it from the devices as if from wine. No one would stand against them. Everyone would sing their praises, place the world at their feet. They would push the boundaries of the practical and the possible, would necessarily go beyond the thinkable. Then would aim weapons and forces not at but around themselves. Rallignon thought it through as salaciously as anxiously as Leuchtmar. State must go against state. Which against which? Leuchtmar and Rallignon could not decide.

A Belgian, distraught like them. came to fetch them to Brussels. Such thoughts flew about like ghosts, touched anyone in contact with the devices.

The three of them drove to Brussels in a car. Bogumil Leuchtmar scoffed: no point going to Brussels, let's turn around, we must think through what we're planning. Sinewy Rallignon was flushed a blotchy red. His eyes darted left and right at the scenery flashing by: travelling through the countryside was not without risk; they might be recognised. He thought everyone could see what he harboured within himself; pressed himself back into the dark corner of the small

speeding vehicle, pulled down his cap: we'll be murdered.

Leuchtmar turned to him: "Why? What have we done?" But he patted his clothes, turned pale: "I'm unarmed." The Fleming insisted on getting out. When the car stopped in a layby, Leuchtmar felt for his hand: "Rallignon my friend. Friend, not enemy. Are you?"

"I say nothing, Bogumil. Come now. What will happen."

Leuchtmar: "Let Europe destroy itself without our help. We won't be sacrificed." Rallignon and the Belgian had jumped out. Leuchtmar followed, eyes cast down, oblivious to houses fields, groaning. Whispered: "Don't talk of it. I'll let nothing slip."

They went one by one into houses, changed clothes. Came in disguise to Brussels.

There Wieshinska had already declared: she would not go to London. Azagga, whose senate was under close supervision from London, loudly backed her up. The Palermo and Cairo representatives were not far from joining Wieshinska, ready to turn on England. Leuchtmar, suddenly among them, advised: no hasty decisions; they'd better go to London. Wieshinska realised he was seeking a delay. She demanded a decision. The Fleming implored: "We shall make no decision." Wieshinska wilted under Leuchtmar's hostile gaze. Without him and Rallignon, nothing could be done.

In London, in the heated greenhouses, foreigners from Asia had turned up. They were there by chance. The Mongols planned to reconnoitre London and the condition of the western states. The continentals surrounded the foreign deputation like dogs around a bone. Stood in front of them, strangely attracted, asked observed listened. The clever melancholy English followed watchfully in the wake of their oriental guests. Gloomy awkward Leuchtmar realised suddenly that he hated the Mongols with their strong bones soft grinning faces, those Japanese tittering among themselves, those two brawny wide-trousered Russians. He hated them. Rallignon ground his teeth. They began to subject the Orientals to savage teasing, which the Londoners tried to deflect. Voluptuous Wieshinska realised what the two men were up to, rejoiced. Azagga, pop-eyed female colossus, Uru and the black-skinned Dongod Dulu allowed themselves to be swept along.

The English hosts quietly adjourned the discussions for several days, to investigate the mood of their continental friends. From these they obtained no more information. Nothing reached the English about the plan to turn against them. But they shrank back from the strong blood-deep demand they perceived; pondered, were shocked, came around.

There below was the city, vibrant. The English hosts withdrew to review matters. The continental guests knew they were prisoners of London, under invisible surveillance until a decision was reached, but were unconcerned. The English only briefly considered killing their guests. They realised that an enemy was being sought, and they themselves were first on the list. They tackled Leuchtmar's delegation. The Asians were invited to no further discussions, the hosts being much preoccupied with matters relating to the near Continent. They escorted the Asians amicably to their great airships. Reports came from Paris that the Asian envoys had alighted from the airships in the vicinity of the city, had scattered in several small vehicles.

WAR

EASTERN populations on the huge ancient continent kept their heads down. The swarthy masses of Asia had accepted the machine, the exotic thing, it crawled over them like a caterpillar. Delicate apparatus, heavy clumsy iron beings were allowed to occupy their soil, but failed to capture their hearts. Always large numbers of these many hundred million people were in the west, absorbing foreign knowledge, mistrusting, watchful. At the time of the most rigorous ruling clans, a select number of Asians were admitted to the forbidden disciplines, allowed possession of materials and models. England tolerated this: it wanted peace and sought alliances with the Asians.

Many races decayed and bloomed in Asia, almost unnoticed by the west. Bombay Calcutta had torn away their European veneer. China had abandoned the big newfangled European cities, natives lodged now in the ruins the cellars left by people from Europe. The yellow brown millions could not be immunised against western attractions; they had adopted the weapons needed to drive out foreigners. Contacts and hesitant negotiations with ever-attentive London proceeded at a snail's pace. When delegations despatched to London re-appeared in Bombay Lhasa Peking Tokyo Kazan Tobolsk, the Asians found themselves armed against anything. In western capitals, the supply of weapons to Asia was well known; people felt they still had the advantage. In the end no one thought it through. Because a breakout was needed.

Over preceding centuries the devices had changed utterly. Machines scattered individually in buildings had come together as machine-blocks machine-houses colossi organised pyramids, had become machine-organisms. Huge numbers of people between the period of Dunkirk and the rebellions of Targuniash and Zuklati had been drafted to heap them together and serve them. The energy economy had led to the networking of all power plants. The effective radius of the energy generated and transformed had grown to gigantic proportions. The energy was stored at certain points. Alongside

power generation plants stood banks of colossal specialised devices, each dedicated to a particular zone; no longer were there unconnected machines.

Now – towards the end of the 25th century – the functional specialisation of the townzone regions had became unstoppable: glass cities light cities food cities clothing cities. In research towns away from the specialised cities, discoveries began to pile up. Then, within a few decades, blocks and pyramids of machinery rapidly coalesced. New forces of Nature, gasiform radiant, sniffed out already a century before, were captured by contemporaries of Meki, yoked into devices. Shambling colossi were put to shame by Lilliput-sized devices. Decades centuries of power became defenceless, paralysed by this moment's glance. Huge machine-cities fell derelict. Inconspicuous in protective casings were delicate devices in which natural forces were imprisoned like ghosts in a jar. Few hands were needed to service them. When you first saw the devices, your heart stood still. You grew used to them, lived under their protection, in comfort and with little gratitude: spoiled offspring of a wealthy family.

These wonderful well-guarded devices, the power-base of the ruling western clans, belonged both to the West and to Asians. In the West, the seething masses were intoxicated by news of things being made ready for them. All at once it dispelled their profound doubting unease, like a spray of ether and camphor onto a fainting body.

Asians called to their people. Showed them the power of the Whites. "They come with machines. Should we defend ourselves? Submit?" The answer was already clear. Indians knew how elephants are tamed, how rivers are crossed, how to pray; the Chinese tilled the soil, sailed boats, traded; the steppe peoples of Siberia knew how to milk and hunt. They thought to summon their magic against the Europeans. Now airships appeared out of the south and east, all heading north and west. When an airship came low – at the sight, the heart missed a beat – Indians and Chinese waved to the flower of their country, their laughing young men: "We're off to stop them, to west and north." Siberians grinned. Mongols honked laughter, hoisted their children high. A million magic spells sped the warriors on their way.

The war was launched by London with profound nonchalance. London wavered between despair and resignation as it agreed to war. There was no other way. It was easy to predict how it would develop. Maybe it would help to get by in the next few decades, maybe they could muddle through for another century. They had welcomed the suppression of unprecedented discoveries, and the emergence of self-assertive townzones. But they saw the futility of these efforts. The machine could not be stopped. The western brain could not be reset.

When Leuchtmar Rallignon and their continental friends had appeared in London, the English hosts were astonished, stroked their sparse black beards. These are children, unteachable. They savoured them. These men and wild forceful Wieshinska want war, a war for their masses. The old ruling clans were smarter. They had already gathered in all weaponry and devices they could lay their hands on, could have massacred a hundred thousand people, millions. These delegates claimed fraternal links with the masses, no barriers between themselves and "the people". They ignored the easier course: stay at home and sort things out; let themselves be goaded harried. The naïve puppies secretly intend to fight against us, against England, great wise mother-empire. Maybe with slogans taken from old history books: freedom, independence. They are foolish one-day wonders. It is necessary that we join them down this stupid path to war. It may perhaps be invigorating. These continentals still have faith, a ridiculous faith in a detestable instrument that should be abandoned.

Leuchtmar Rallignon Uru Wieshinska Azagga Dongod Dulu returned to the Continent. The Eastern Hemisphere must be brought to heel. You can't hurl fire at the stars if you haven't brought even the Earth's globe to heel, and a hundred miles beyond the Vistula the world is resisting. A new impulse surged through the frivolous smouldering masses: images of gigantic steppe, high mountains soaring, teeming exotic landscapes and cities. We shall fall on these, blend infiltrate into them. It must come to pass. We have the devices. Come to pass this very moment. Everyone knew about the tremendous inexhaustible power of the devices. The soul that carried the flags of flames and stars across the landscapes of the western continents was not the soul of former days. Feverish strength heated the heart, made muscles tense. They held the flags high, swept up every will.

Townzone regions mobilised. Horde upon horde of men and women insisted on joining up for the struggle. The war would be conducted by a few tens of thousands of specialists. On reflection, many more should be recruited, to keep them busy, eliminate them. In every land the leadership set up a special office solely to think up mindless tasks for soldiers: Post B, as London designated it, in distinction to Post A, which dealt with the real war. Post B was quickly staffed by the cleverest political minds, who kept in loose contact with technical and military specialists. The response to Post B was so strong in the western continents that initial plans proved inadequate. They reverted to earlier methods of military service: artillery was put in place, defensive works were thrown up, devices installed in fortified emplacements; the troops were promised miracles, but they must train to gain the benefit: murderous models. London went further, on the lines of its earlier thinking. Its B-Command took large armies, regiments of enthusiastic dangerous men and women to the actual theatre of war, the Russian Plain, where they were to engage in dreadful unavailing toil.

The Asians would not yield the Russian Plain. Westerners advanced along three fronts; on bridges tracks that they laid in a few days they poured in from Poland Romania Galicia and overflew overran Vitebsk Mogilev Poltava Kherson. The Dnieper and its swamps lay behind them. Towns in this sector were not unfamiliar. Before them lay a denser mesh of villages farms, scattered settlements. Beyond Yaroslavl Vladimir Voronezh Kharkov they approached rivers that fed mighty Volga, the Yergeni Hills, the wide hilly banks of Volga itself. To the north they hit Vetka Vologda.

Here the first squadrons of fliers fell to earth, burning crashing from a white sky onto silent fields. More squadrons approached. Crashed. Could not penetrate the invisible barrier. When research technologists arrived, they detected the

radio waves that caused engines to fail. And while they were still investigating the type of waves, points of origin, formulae, on the ground a monstrous human wave came sweeping down upon them. On horseback in wagons carts, gliding downriver in ships boats canoes, human and animal bodies rolled streamed from east to west, gushed thrust welled from north to south. Bewildered wailing half-crazed people, men women children horses cattle pigs that they drove along, chickens carried shooed along. Moaning shrieking ragged naked solitaries. Vast dumb incessant hordes, rural communities, unquestioning. Dazed, faces shawls clothes muddy. They pressed on all through the night. No time to attend to dying infants: the wave fell prostrate, wept, scratched cheeks and forehead, left the bodies covered in grass, burial impossible in the sodden ground; pushed on sped on, dreaming. It clutched at what it held and found: trees huts boards, threw itself into water, swam trampled groaned rowed. It sighed screamed, it was multitudes of women who let down their hair, tore bit, looked back: wide whimpering gaze at a grey gloomy sky that showed nothing but clouds. It's all burning back there, they screamed; had not themselves seen the burning, men had come from other villages, the news spread far and wide.

Now the invaders became aware of surging masses of birds covering the sky, shrill or silent in a single wave or scattered flights from east to west, from north to south, thick clumps of ravens, war-parties of smaller birds, mountain-finches nutcrackers whistling overhead, they filled the night with their twittering calling trilling. The ground sown with tiny exhausted tumbling bodies. They swept flapped fluttered high overhead. And the living things of the Earth mobilised alongside the people. Flocks of bats clung to carts. At a touch they flapped up, swooped on outstretched arms, settled. The ground pullulated beneath the feet of the migrating people and herds. Mice, black and grey, teemed over paths, sodden fields. At rivers they covered the surface squeaking, little sleek twitching backs, tails flicking spiralling. Ran over rocks, swept down, sped along ditches, came down from trees. Swift shadows of jerboas looming vanishing. People surging through Vologda and Vetka carried clubs knives, bloody wolf pelts on their carts. As they drove forward, bears foxes wolverines ran out of the zones behind them. A mass that zigzagged hopped capered black brown grey, jumped across paths, lay snarling in the dust, expired panting, tumbled, run down. Kirghiz riders on small brown horses, good swimmers, Bukaev hordes from the salt marshes, faces dark and blunt. Snorted, made no answer, whipped their horses on.

As the White advance faltered, was brought to a stumbling halt by fires and obstructing villages and settlements, scouts pushed through the dreadful scrum of animals and people, armed and in protective gear, on horseback. Before the shattered survivors returned, the obstacle had already been blown up. Circling high above the Volga, the smoking Kirghiz Steppe, gazing down on Samara Perm they saw the plain, teeming with people and beasts.

But behind the people and beasts, an immense wall of smoke and flames bent away far to north and south, advanced visibly slowly with hardly a pause, crept closer by little pulsebeats. Fire and smoke cut off the horizon, left no gaps, a rolling wall.

Fliers approached as close to the flames as they dared, afraid of being caught by rays. In the end saw fire erupt from the earth with the earth, spurt from the ground clamber across hills and heights, speed over flat land and mountain. No river could stop it. Now the westerners retreated, fled pell-mell by road and air from the Volga line. They dug in from Kherson north to the Valdai Hills. They knew these millions who lived in the rich well-watered cultivated plain, and those hastening towards them ahead of the wall of flames. They flew over Mogilev Smolensk Chernikov Poltava Kiev Ekatarinoslav; Orel Kursk Kaluga Tula Tver Novgorod Tambov. Flames edged closer from the east, out of the Urals region; the Asians were sacrificing the land: the waves of living things will overwhelm the westerners, and the wall of flames will take the whole of Europe, the Balkans, Poland, down to the Baltic Sea.

Defensive measures were called for.

As the fires crept down from the Urals, five days later opposing fires came towards them from Kherson through Poltava Mogilev Pskov to the Valdai Hills.

Shafts were sunk deep in the earth, shaft after shaft. Boring machines dug in, tore the earth apart in a line from green Lake Ladoga to Crimea's Putrid Sea. The earth was clawed as if by a giant harrow. Machines injected explosives gases salts into the shafts, other machines above honeycombed the soil, mixed it with gases salts, imbued it with heat. Earth was flung high with a thunderous roar, smoking blood-flames, devoured itself snapping at air, rose in a swirling chugging cloud. Smouldering sheaves of flame leapt in columns from the uplifted soil, burned white and green straight into the air to a great height behind the billowing downspattering mass. Flame by flame like the teeth of a giant harrow, over meadows ploughland, over villages highways, from the Putrid Sea to Lake Ladoga Kherson Poltava Mogilev Pskov Valdai. Lighting up the cloud-covered sky day and night, rattling shaking it with thunderous blasts and counterblasts. People houses rocks hills animals forests sent sprawling flying soaring tumbling, river valleys torn apart filled in. Beds of lakes and streams blown up by the creeping inexorable debris-raining thing that flowed forward in its own bed of heat. It engulfed swamps; natterjack toads wily salamanders hopped high across the bog. Frogs in reeds ducked under water against the smoke that poured across the swampy surface. Explosions all around. When they made a backwards leap they were lifted up together with the mud under their suction pads, spun about, poisonous fumes all around, dry flames, gas and soil green from the bog battered their spattered bodies.

The harrow across Volhynia and the Bug. The population slipped away southward past Ekaterinoslav to the sea, to Crimea. The harrow jabbed at the Dnieper. Its mighty waters surged unbanked east and west, flooded sprayed roared over torn broken earth, steaming swamps. Rivers brooks lakes, robbed of their confines, spilled across new ground, swirled mud and silt. Speeding behind the harrow came the funnels gas-dispensers salt-blenders heat-breathers. The

snorting mineworks advanced all by themselves, emptied themselves of their electrical charge and payload; freed of the burden of earth as it disintegrated in howling and smoke they stocked up on new nourishment as they paused in the quivering air. Braced stabbed bored beneath the masses of soil that lay ahead, broke through hills tree-roots foundations of towns with gases heat explosions ashes.

Blueblack squadrons, flying low, pulled back to Poland Galicia Romania where land and trees became black, cattle died in the meadows, people headed west. In the empty east the green flood foamed over churned ground. The mineworks shuddered under water, boring ripping. The sombre line edged jerkily east. The earth opened up, water poured into the fissures. Flames roared, torrents rushed among them.

In warm verdant Crimea, regiments of English B-Army troops turned up. They came by ship from the south through the Bosporus and across the Black Sea. The Black Sea was thick with thousands of sailboats steamboats freighters. Fins cut the water between them. To the north, near the shore, herds of swimming drowning horses. Masses pouring down from the Sea of Azov, the Putrid Sea, from the Caucasus, from Crimea itself, jammed up in confusion on the shore. Cossacks Kirghiz Slavs with peasants priests men and children women, staring at the blueblack water, plunging in. The ground beneath, sand grassy meadow, already undermined by migrating jerboas with their terrible piping, scrabbling paws. Day and night, battles were fought with wolves and foxes behind among them, fleeing like them, feasting on the fallen.

Shuddering, overwhelmed by horror, the disembarking troops abandoned their vessels to the refugees and pressed north to form a line between Kherson and Taganrog. Constantly thrown into disarray by horrible swarms of tumbling jerboas, packs of ravening wolves, then by masses of refugees who were descending into brute savagery as the front line closed in. The refugees engaged in a life and death struggle with the soldiers; they were starving, wasted by terror bitterness hatred. The poorly armed troops were crushed. But more came pouring in from the human reservoirs of the western realm to cut a desperate path through, always at enormous cost.

Their aim was to halt the advance of the Urals wildfire between Kherson and Taganrog on undamaged land between the two front lines. London feared that with all lowlying land between the Urals and the Dvina underwater, no territory would be left suitable for an attack base. The continental masses needed action and victory. Terrain must be kept open to form a battlefield between the eastern and western wastelands, the watery and the burned. The B-Army was assigned only a small number of technical units for its protection. Its leaders considered the attempt almost hopeless. The relentless close-packed advance of the mineworks towards the arc of the Urals wildfire as the western fireline paused, the pumping of reaction-inhibiting gases, shelling with solvents and refrigerant salts – these were effective in only a few places. The tempo of the eastward advance eventually reached an unprecedented fury. The human and faunal worlds of Russia, thrusting down from east and north, hemmed in to the west, drowning starving burning, almost everywhere hampered the placing of counter-shafts, destroyed the pipelines and cables hauled along behind from southern waters. To the hostility of the still strong native forces towards the westerners was added a blinding despair, revulsion for anything human, indeed living. A wave of barbarians and cannibals rolled south. Pulled along, trapped among them, the troops of the west.

As they fled, skirmishing left and right, the troops saw the western fireline leap high, green flames jumping advancing towards the eastern fires. As green yellow smoke billowed about them their screams were indistinguishable from those of the blackened Kirghiz Slavs. Hundreds caught in the back by their own side's fire, roasted.

The leaping lines of mineworks met on a front Bardiansk Kharkov Orel Kaluga Tver, pounded crashed raged in a single fiery fury. Thunder and lightning from borers blasters gasblowers heatspreaders.

Thick muddy water spraysurged bubbled over them. They had poisoned it, made it boil rise up spurt, hurl in columns overhead. It crashed back foaming. They must calm it. Cables were severed. The charge trickled out muddy, inky.

As the fire sent by the yellow races from the endless pine forests and ravines of the eastern slopes moved down from the Urals, from Telposis in the high Arctic, the ridges of Yamantau, Iremel, the western ocean saw a multitude of gas-ships giant ships airships despatched from England Ireland, the Bay of Biscay, Cape Verde Islands, the Guinea coast. They crossed the wide Atlantic the Caribbean; passing through the Panama Canal spread out along the west coast of the American continents to forestall any Asiatic assault from the west. American fleets joined them. Submarines gas-ships, among them a long line of ponderous construction vessels surrounded by swarms of defence and scout ships, cut through the vast western waters, passed by Hawaii Tuamotu Tuvalu, formed a southern front near New Zealand, clustered more densely further north, from New Guinea to Kamchatka.

Here they were in enchanted seas. Encountered disturbances which they attributed to mechanical failures on board, deceptive feints by their commander. Submersibles and surface vessels began to change speed, move faster, shoot ahead, change course, slow, come to a stop. This was repeated at irregular intervals, happened now here, now there along the broad slowly advancing front line that girdled the eastern edge of the Asian landmass. Then a vessel would experience a sudden jolt, come to a stop. Ships stopped dead, screws churning left and right, reared up, unable to move. Slowly they pulled free, freer, hurtled ahead on the scent of their adversary at astonishing speed, under water, on the foaming surface, felt suddenly they were out of control, about to founder, some force was upon them. Something ahead was pulling them, tugging them. Pulling them on, sucking them in. Ships rampaging, crazed, no longer bound to the water, driven not by engines, speeding jolting over the waves, hulls flexing, almost capsizing, taking a roll, toppling toppled. Until they saw the blackwhite mass they were flying mesmerized towards, it came flying at them, a bank of white black hurtling like them through the hissing ocean, an iron ship hurtling into them prow to prow, sweeping them into a mad

wedding dance, arms noisily linked tripping falling down: the Philippines fleet was approaching Mindanao.

A group of low vessels from the oriental enemy came into view. At once the westerners caused the engines of the Asian fleet to cut out; the low vessels stood motionless inshore, a line of sentries. Like prancing knights the White fleet galloped towards them in wedge formation; waves sprayed merrily as they cut through. Suddenly the lead vessel stumbled, the point of the wedge. Crumpled, could not stay upright, sank into emptiness. The nearest vessels kept coming, crumpled, decks under water. Vanished as if into a hole in the sea. As if they were horses, hamstrings cut, dropping to their bellies, vanishing. Ship after ship. Along the coast, the Yellow fleet in a line. The wedge kept coming. Water was torn away from under the ships. They dropped into the hole. The sinkhole widened left and right, an inverted dome. Ships plunging twisting, on the bottom of the watery gorge overwhelmed by onrushing waves, buried by water closing over them swirling growing calm.

The rolling waves were swept from under them. Plunging into emptiness, never again to see lights blinking from wide funnels. The White fleet began to balk. As they hesitated the sea was torn apart more widely all about them. They whirled around the raging maelstrom. Here and there one plunged in. Not many hauled themselves reversing out from it.

Reports from the western continents reached them via America.

Their eyes pictured the war of wildfires in the Urals. Unease in the fleets. The leaders debated measures to dampen the drastic impact on the crew of orders that came from London via New York: pull back and become a coastal protection force. They sped in a wide line back across the Pacific to its eastern edge. Asian attack planes were lurking off the coast. The westerners were glad: they could offer their crews an adventure. The Yellow fliers fled, westerners in close pursuit. Just as the Asians pulled water from under our hulls, we'll take away their air.

Rockets through the darkness from vessels of the White fleet along the coast. They probed the little fingers that hung gently swaying in the air, protected by deflecting weapons: huge floating bulwarks of cargo airships, as big as the Whites' construction vessels. Black shapes were carried aloft on the garland of rockets, hung between them in chains. Then the rockets began to glow, low thuds: squall-bombs exploding along the chains. They burst from higher to lower, swept air aside, each blow just a second behind the last, a wedge pushing air aside. Like a swimmer on a flexing diving board who bends his knees, gathers for the audacious dive, the board slams, the body twists belly-first grunting onto the spraying surface: so did the Yellow fliers and airships hang there in readiness for the leap the throw. Feet pulled from under them. Helpless, not knowing what was happening, they hurtled down, spun about themselves in the dark roaring air, crashed into the sea, mouths open, hands clenched, dreaming waiting.

The Yellow fliers pulled back, gathered like ravens in the Gulf of Panama. Sinister activity all along the Chagres River from Limon Bay to Panama City. They changed height every minute, the ships of the White fleet in the locks of Miraflores, Pedro Miguel. These tore gaps in the squadron of fliers with furious squalls points balls; the fliers closed up, sped apart. They dived singly, seemed first to focus on Colon, the end of the Canal, then on the first locks. They sped like flocks of ravens along the chain of hills around the Canal, kept the ships in their sights as they moved along the Canal; veered left and right as if up to nothing much. Passing quickly through the locks, the ships made haste along the reaches: Paraiso San Pablo Soldado. The vessels passed unmolested by Bohio Soldado, out past Colon, formed up, waited in Limon Bay.

Ship after ship passed through the locks. New arrivals were surprised to receive no signal from those already waiting. A silent multitude of ships was gathering in ever deeper silence. The newcomers thought that engines must have failed, sent launches fliers over to them. And when they climbed dropped aboard they found – laughing people, lying walking. Gales of laughter greeted them. They hung at masts, along railings, stretched out here and there snoozing snorting. They waved jumped about, bodies hunched as if convulsed by a dreadful thrill, roared laughter out full-throated, danced on tiptoe. Some rested their heads against a mast, head drooped to the chest or pressed back against the wood. Body swaying side to side with the ship's rocking. They smirked in sweet lassitude, played with their fingers, slid their legs slowly out, sat fell over, lay sputtering. Men and women mostly swooning in a mad ecstasy.

The visitors came, shook the sleepy bodies; their eyes widened, bloodshot eyes with burst vessels in the whites, bloated face twisted in a confiding grin. Titters gurgles grunts from the drooling gaping mouth; slowly they turned over. After a while the people shaking them felt compelled to stay, to grin and yawn, laugh at nothing, sneeze and giggle and then laugh till the sides hurt. Again burst out laughing, again cough up their lungs, they felt wonderful, tired, tireder. Some found the strength to return to their own ship; there the giggling started to hit.

Now reports flew across the bay. Ravens were perched all along the hills by the Canal, shifting position now and then. Fliers from the White fleet circled over them. They flapped up wildly, fled from the squalls. The Cartegena power plant kicked in. The Yellow fliers were within reach of its electrical fire, the fizzing mesh of Cartegena's waves. An invisible thunderstorm surrounded them, scattered them. Devices held in the powerful current behaved like eager beloved pets: waggled shivered jumped up jumped down, ran off, leapt high. They flung about twisted turned, propellers working blindly. They were caught like flies in a spider's web. Yellow pilots turned off the engine; the machine plummeted a little way, then hung fast, even climbed, climbed. From below they watched the show the machines put on, hanging motionless in the air as if at the bottom of the sea. They saw engines run and stop. The storm of radiation was relentless.

After hours-long pushing straining they were no nearer to dumping the heavy device-laden fliers into the sea. Only a few pilots extricated themselves, threw clothes into the void, jumped naked from the machine that at once bounded higher. The rest swayed passively in their steel can. Were jerked upwards little by little into the ash-cloud, were suddenly

caught up, hurled miles ahead, pierced, holed, chewed, little white lights flickering, disintegrating.

Observers came west from Romania Poland Germany. Sombre fleets crossed the Atlantic. How many ships foundered as they came, near the Antilles the Bahamas. Deep misgivings held them back. They hesitated to turn around, either to the old continent or to America. Attacks were observed in parts of the fleet, ship against ship.

Scouts came away from the western edge of the Russian desolation zone. They flew walked came by boat. Flooded land to beyond the horizon. Landscapes levelled. Where now were forests meadows the green of leaves and grass, ploughed fields flowers animals leaping, birds singing? Lakes flowed blackbrown greenish, shattered treetrunks complete with tops and roots floated, body-parts of animals and people, bright red and pink from poison gas. Broken brown-scorched bedsteads shovels sled-runners drifting in a dense jumble, piled high over boggy ground, sharp peaks, flattened pyramids miles across: the sites of towns and villages. Blocks of stone cemented together remains of houses heaps of clay wheels bits of iron shop windows.

Wide craters in the chernozem, desolate piles of stone around Kharkov and Kursk. Rich black soil ploughed under thrown up pulverised, it was inert, no blade of grass poked through, no worm stirred, no ants ran. Dense clusters of hills along the southern Volga taken by the harrow of the mineworks; the Volga, flooding for miles into what had been Kirghizia, trickling west through sieveholes onto lowlying land. The sieve collapsed: the Volga broke through to the west. No scouts crossed the Volga. Several fell, having disregarded orders concerning safety measures. Group after group turned back, burdened by an obscure sorrow. Melancholy, griefstricken, they fell on cities of the east like meteors exhaling fire as they die.

English and continental state powers had done what they had to do towards the end of the war: disposed of multitudes of their people in the massively expanding B-Armies, which were decimated without mercy. Asian attacks were signalled by massed fliers; thousands of defenceless troops were poured onto the fallow fields of Romania and Poland. New weaponry was tested on live objects. For every ten Yellow fliers brought down on the Panama coast by squall-bombs and rockets, a hundred thousand Whites had tested the power of the squalls. Decisive and unthinking, the dictatorship of the desperate ruling elites. Before the belt of exploding mines was laid between the Putrid Sea and Lake Ladoga in the face of the Asian enemy, engulfing Kherson Poltava Mogilev Pskov Valdai, it had already travelled many times over testing grounds in Walachia the Po plain Westphalia Wales, had despatched regiments of the superfluous with poisons and explosions.

Now news of the war seeped into the inexhaustible flippantly sophisticated cities. Scouts came among the masses, dripping gloom. In London, in townzones of England and the Continent, at that moment dictatorship became overt. No fighting was necessary in London. In two or three moves Rallignon and his troops seized all the nutrition and weapons facilities in Paris Lille Chalons Orleans. The woman Wieshinska, who had come under the paralysing rays of the Japanese during passage of the Panama Canal, was among the few who recovered after a brief illness. She retained spirit and willpower: legs dangling limp from her chair, she deposed the senate of her region with her radiant still lively face, her powerful deep voice that drew people to her; brought all factories and weapons under her control.

Images of dead landscapes appeared in every waiting clamorous town. There was no attempt at concealment. No defeat was declared. Only: nothing had changed. Youngsters, men and women, the leaders, flags held high, had cried their power. Fire from the Earth, in human hands, blazing up to the stars: there it is on the Russian Plain, from the Urals to the Valdai Hills. Ground torn up, rivers drained, people trees animals devoured. Horrible dead land. This was the work of the youngsters with their flags. Their achievement. This was the secret of the devices, the marvellous powers of Nature harnessed in their retorts. Those returning from the fleet told that these were no mere fables, what the technologists and experts said about air-squalls water-squalls long-wave and short-wave radiation fiery explosions. But nothing could be done with it. People in the cities went about as before, grew flowers in greenhouses, enjoyed sport and circuses. What were you supposed to do? The young ruling men and women had failed. Their ridiculous flags. Let them tear up the earth, poison cities. If they want, they can destroy our western lands as well.

Scouts returning from the east came from deep within these cities. They went freely among the masses. They bore witness, had such faces, whispered like lunatics, shouted, waved their arms, covered their eyes. Those landscapes, mighty rivers torn from their beds. Forests fields teeming masses of beasts and people: all gone. In some cities, attempts were made to assassinate the messengers in a helpless poisonous self-lacerating rage: because they've done this to us. Many returnees were so deeply hollowed out by grief and fear that they could only wander weeping through the streets. As if they had been punished and were lamenting, seeking atonement, telling their misfortune; they stood on bandstands, ran into halls and council chambers, cried out. Just so had the hero in those old poems cried when his dear friend was struck down, his body disgraced and stripped bare. It was an aftershock of the cries of the hordes of beasts and people fleeing before the wave of fire in the Urals, the thousands on the Sea of Azov and the Putrid Sea, all those crammed together, Cossacks Kirghiz Slavs peasant women, staring at the blueblack sea while the ground beneath was carried away by migrating creatures, the line of fire rolling behind crackling blazing.

Everywhere the saddened sated masses shook themselves in the torment of their forsakenness. Just so does the volcano rage, roar jauntily full of pride and delight, so that painful forces rise up in it, glowing lava given from it to pour out a broad blanket over the Earth. Let rulers burn entire landscapes: now we'll blaze out over the rulers, take revenge. Wherever townzone regions were not secured by a strong senate, revolts broke out like wildfires, streetcars factories destroyed.

Following these events, no peace treaty was concluded between the western peoples and the Asians. Nothing

happened. The war was over, like a beast poleaxed in the neck. The states drew themselves in. Each townzone region struggled for its own existence.

PARTS THREE & FOUR
(abridged):
MARDUK

HOMECOMING

CONSUL MARKE was the first to turn up in Berlin. During the Urals War he was a scout with the technical troops. He flew out of black Crimea, dying people all around, expiring horses dogs foxes cats, across devastated Bessarabia, the silent Beskids Carpathians. Crowds were already gathering as he approached Berlin, waiting along autumnal avenues among gardens and tree nurseries. Megaphones had been set up. Landing in front of his house he went without a word through the roar of the crowds, closed the door behind him. His dun clothing, when he called his two daughters to him, gave off an acrid stench of gas and burning. He demanded – after gazing at them a long time unmoving, while they cried and stroked the stony man's hands face – that they take their own lives. By and by his stony demeanour was racked by sobs groans.

"You don't want to kill yourselves? Don't you want to kill yourselves?" Always the same question, in a monotone. He spoke the local German-English vernacular; now and then mumbled an incomprehensible jargon: the Russian of the people between the firelines. The daughters fell at his feet, wept in despair. Two elderly servants led them away; he would not look at them. The stiff-backed man, flying helmet pushed up from his forehead, again urged: "You must kill yourselves."

"Why? But why? What have we done?"

He mumbled in Russian. Then he stood shakily, pulled the helmet up from his face: "You – you have done nothing. What has any one of us done. Or two. Me neither. We did nothing. We must all go." He fiddled with the steel harness he had just unclipped, struck the floor as if whipping something. Jourdane, the younger, offered him a drink. He tipped the wineglass, peered down at the slim blonde girl. In a confusion of anger and fear she tried to take his arm. The older girl held her back. "I won't drink your poison, woman." Marke put the glass on the table, paced up and down trailing the harness, knocked the glass over. "I won't share the same air with you. You shouldn't have come if you won't listen. This is my air. You must go. All of you. Kill yourselves."

Megaphones blared in the streets. Stepping to the window Marke cried: "What are you waiting for. You must begone. Begone, I say." He was not one of the ruling elite; Leuchtmar, assassinated in Hamburg, had never met him. The people below scattered in confusion, not knowing what he wanted.

Jourdane stayed that night at Marke's bedside; he slept little. She thought he must have contacted some poison in the war. As she leaned towards him over the arm of the chair, horror welled in her. She sat a while, could hold back no longer. Had to lift her head, push herself up from the chair, place her feet, stand, go. No glance at the man in the bed. She went to the door. Picked up Marke's slender steel harness, hung it from a hinge, climbed onto a chair to put her neck through it, with a rush of joy kicked the chair away, head in the loop. Her head must catch in the loop. As her feet kicked against the wobbling chair she felt a low trickling breeze against her body knees arms. Dreadful joy rose in the throat that offered itself to the cold harness.

The man, startled by the falling chair, saw her hanging. He tried to get up to save her, but his legs refused to move. The arms gripping the edge of the bed cramped. He kept his head directed towards the dangling girl. Listened attentively. Slowly he managed to swallow, drew air noisily in through nose mouth, snorted, groaned.

His savage ever louder groans as he sat riveted on the bed, head turned to the dangling girl, summoned the other daughter from her sleep. At first she did not see the cause of his gasping mumbling. Followed his gaze. Swayed in the doorway, drew deep breaths, sagged, pulled herself forward. Quickly lifted her sister down, bent over her. Marke in his shirt on the edge of the bed. His bare feet jigged on the carpet. His daughter, in tears as Jourdane lay lifeless, launched herself at him, flung her arms around him. And as her contorted face flooded with tears, she looked up into her father's face. It was twitching violently. His legs arms his back aped the way Jourdane had twitched hanging there. His legs kept jerking, tried to bend the knees, kick the feet. He tensed harder, harder.

He gained control of his muscles. Gave Janina the same chilling menacing imperious look as before. She drew back. Her horror disgust at this creature. Ran to her sister, loosened the harness from her neck as she knelt, eyes averted, held it tight in her fist like a whip with which she meant to lay about the man. Stood, gripping the harness, to force the lip-biting man whose breathing filled the room back onto the bed, do to him what she could. The monster who had driven the sweet young girl to this. Then she felt his eyes. His expression so changeable: now trembling dissolving, now rigid and pitilessly imperious, now filled with pain. His fists were at his bare throat, clawing at the skin. He was engulfed by despair, bowled over, struck in every limb.

She knelt before him a moment. Listened, looked up. Touched his hands. His face hardened. She stood with tensed muscles, glanced at her sister lying on the carpet, mouth open, knees drawn up. The harness fell from Janina's pale hands, which opened in imitation of the dead girl's. What was it behind her on the bed. She pulled the chair. Slender harness. Hinge. Face frozen. Chair wobbling. She, Janina, would some hours later lie with Jourdane, head on her tender breast, legs drawn up. The two old servants wailing at their side. Marke still sitting on the bed, groaning softly, not answering when spoken to. Towards noon he dressed. He chafed his hairy chest with the steel harness until it bled, fastened the harness under his shirt directly on the bleeding flesh. He stood for hours in the room, speechless, unearthly, fists clenched.

At that time there were ways to reproduce figures and landscapes in plazas, open streets, using coloured swirling

smoke, modelled on the *fata morgana* of the desert. Science had discovered the secret: artificial clouds carried the phantoms, receiving live images projected via prisms and mirrors. These tele-visions instantly transferred events from any distance to appear as if alive in the *fata morgana*'s coloured smoke.

That evening megaphones blared. Picture-clouds swirled in the plazas, gardens, at the circus. Marke appeared. His face known to many, but grey-haired, loose strands about the ears, forehead; face grief-ravaged. Annihilated face, now rigid, now dissolved in tremors. He stood a long while on the balcony of his house, silent. His pounding baleful hand movements, hot hate-filled gaze drove many away. His mouth opened. Rumble clatter roar from the megaphone: "I am alive. My daughters are dead. They did the right thing. Away with you too." He screamed: "This is me," beat his breast, tore off jacket, shirt. He gripped the steel harness in both hands, pounded his bare shaggy chest. His face showed no change of expression, no letup in its icy flickering exhausted twitching. "This is me." The people tending to the smoke machine below stood half-stunned. Marke's balcony, the house-front, his figure often vanished behind the thick unfading fog. The crowd called out in fear; the figure always re-emerged. They saw the iron paling that he broke from the balcony rail, directed at his own throat; the moment he aimed it at his own eyes. Struck at his head, right left. A thousand hands reaching from the crowd. Gurgles groans wheezing from the megaphone. Blind Marke lived on. New envoys arrived bringing images of the Urals War.

CONSUL MARKE

A DARK MOOD lay upon the whole townzone region. They had had enough of life, wanted only death. Most factories stood idle. Only the most essential contacts were maintained with neighbouring zones. The owners of great factories lay like hounds exhausted from the chase, tongues lolling, paws stretched, immobile. Nothing could be done; there was only one scene the masses wanted to replay: Marke, menacing on the balcony, putting out his eyes. He had said nothing. Waved hand and harness through the air, in a dull monotone demanded: "Kill yourselves." In those weeks, here and in other western cities, strong men and women quietly took their own lives.

While this death-wish raged through the populace, Marke kept to his room. In the deep darkness surrounding him his head was turned always to the door, the hinge.

Then he sensed a movement at his knees and hips. He felt about, nothing there. Dropped his hands. Again the movement. Hands feeling slowly slowly up to his chest, ever so gently. He let it happen, was glad, had no fear at all.

It was the dead girl, Jourdane, the slim younger daughter. She stroked his empty eye sockets. A scent of lilacs came with her. She had thrown both arms around his neck, was sitting on the edge of the bed at his side. He touched her cold cheek.

"Father," a breath. He sat unmoving, was glad. "Father. You're blind. I'm no longer with you." He sat quite still. His upper body swayed. She was with him. "Father, how many flowers beetles people and children have died because of us. I'm no longer living. You are blind, father, your lovely eyes can see no more. How many more must die."

He asked: "Where's Janina? Is Janina with you?"

"I'll call her, father." And now he felt – released. He sat alone a long minute. A breeze, a breath. The touch on shoulder forehead he felt with yearning, a lingering pressure on his face. "Janina, is that you?" It made no answer for a while, kept touching his head; sobbed: "Yes, I am Janina."

"You're here, Janina. Really here. My sweet child." It swayed at his side, held still. "Where did you leave Jourdane?"

"We can only come one by one."

"Come more often, Janina."

"We are here very often, father. You don't see us, don't hear us, don't feel us."

"But I can feel you." And his body swayed like a mast in a gale. His spine gave way. He fell back.

Next morning he summoned the two women who had been with the girls. He was changed, spoke gently to them. They could be with him often in the house. But must tread softly so that he could hear Janina and Jourdane when they came. They came often. Tender departed souls. He sat smiling in his chair, unmoving. He stroked the hands of the old weeping women.

He issued an announcement to workers, the unemployed, factory owners, people of the white and coloured races: he would speak to them. After brief hesitation, Marke had yielded to the urgings of the Senate.

With him began the line of Consuls of Berlin.

He acted in the open, visible to all and in ways that made sense. All treaties with other zones and foreign states were abrogated. Only those directly serving the livelihood of the populace would be honoured. Such as those for dynamic power, harnessed from waterfalls in Scandinavia and Switzerland and distributed across the Continent. Food synthesis – at first Marke wanted to abolish the chemical laboratories, the vast fungus and organ facilities, but this was beyond his ability, for there was insufficient farmland. But he drove huge numbers out from the cities to till the soil, sent surplus

people as far away as possible.

His consulship began with the disarming of the city. He demolished the ring of masts around the periphery, the first line of defence. All defensive weapons and devices were dismantled. Next came the astonishing step that broke the heart of the city, shook millions, Senate and masses, to the core: he blew up the central switchgear and power storage sites, the protected unapproachable reservoirs of holy energy. Only now did Senate and people realise: they had placed over themselves an active force. The energy that flowed from great distances was split up beyond the borders of the zone; it arrived from many sources; no installation was supplied with more than its work demanded. Any attempt by individuals to store energy was a capital offence. At this point several of the most powerful ruling clans handed over their factories, vanished into the ranks of the synthetically fed and the workers. These displaced elements in due course spawned enemies of the new urban entity.

Berlin extended over a broad undulating plain between the lower Elbe valley and the Oder. It formed a stratum over levels of clay loam sand laid down in the last Ice Age, from the rye-fields of Fläming, the southern Lausitz Hills, up to Baltic landscapes of meadows and lakes along the coast. It encompassed swamps woods rivers, forests and valleys, the relict ice-age valley by Baruch, terminal moraine of the Dubrow Hills where pine oak birch grew tall, higher land along the Havel, parched Zauche with its lakes Schwielow and Rietz. In the east it reached to the Oder Swamps and Küstrin. Its facilities spread across lowlying swampy Rhin and Havelland, its outer limits took in Schwedt and Prenzlau to the northeast on the boggy moraine uplands of Uckermark.

In the townzone's numerous large plazas and massive intersections, in all the great public spaces the ceremonial statue of a bull, knees broken, exerted a powerful impact. A knife long as an arm stuck out of its left flank. Once every morning and afternoon the statue roared like a ship's siren, imitating both the cry and the limb-trembling fear in the voice of a great dying beast. It roared out at different unexpected times in different districts of the zone. Everyone had to drop inessential work for a few minutes.

The years of lethargy that ensued seemed endless. Once the city had been disarmed, central plants blown up, the tilling of fields reinstated, Marke left the city to itself, retained along with the Senate only a monitoring role. Everyone lived for himself. Mystical sects spread. They attracted many; the numbers of unemployed had grown with the closure of factories and isolation from the world around. The sects railed against the food of Hell, devilish work of man; sinister preachers spat fury at the laboratories that had been spared, the drums of salts acids metals delivered to them to be made into sugars and fats, the plant and animal bodies whose organ-parts organ-fluids served as the workforce.

Settlements had grown up on Lake Müritz. Every day pilgrims came to where the gaunt sceptical white man James Maikotten began his question-and-answer game: what were they going to do. Did they believe the world would be improved if a couple of factories went up in smoke. A couple of factories. He advised castration. They should snip the testicles from every newborn male child, only then might they hope the Earth would look better in fifty years' time: weeds in the meadows, a few houses still occupied by the old, but wild animals have returned; the Earth can calm down, the perverse species Mankind is done for. The whole world needs to recover from Mankind. Not just Russia. Mankind is an abortion of a species. Surrur was right: but his Wind and Water Theory was too optimistic. No doubt about it: the human species cannot endure. It's destroying itself, eating itself up; its gifts drive it to do so. What does Consul Marke offer? A throat-warmer as a cure for plague. The patient is full of toxins: a throat-warmer! Why not just a few good words? The toxins will surely understand English or German and accept a talking-to and go on their way. They could have spared us the trappings of a blind Consul. But in the end there's no harm in it: he dresses well. He's a fine dignified Consul, before he goes to bed.

They had long grown used to the synthetic highly refined foodstuffs that were available at any time in inordinate quantities. The taste of purely animal or vegetable food they found repulsive. In all the western townzone regions they laughed and shook their heads when they compared the mild infinitely variable flavours of a Meki-meal with the pungent odour of roast animal muscle, a chunk of fish. It was magical how the designers of Meki-meals, closely linked to the nutrition factories, could alter the taste texture chewiness smell colour of a dish. It would have been a wrench for these people, the third or fourth generation reared on synthetic food, to revert to natural fare. Their stomachs no longer secreted enough acids to dissolve animal muscle, the intestines had grown lazy and slack, the big gastric glands, no longer used, had atrophied. The people of this era could easily have developed arms and legs of iron. But without thinking what they were doing, they opted as they lay around in play, hardly moving, for fatty sweet foodstuffs to fill them, render them numb. Their limbs grew heavy and weak. Foreign immigrants newly settled in the western regions looked on in astonishment and laughed: so these are our masters, lords of the Earth. Black tribes, Hamitic and Indian groups felt instinctive unease, fled back home and barricaded themselves against the Europeans: they had no wish to become like them.

Many waited for Consul Marke to die. The blind man surrounded himself with a handful of people, changed them often in growing mistrust. He rejected women, but it was women who were most attracted to him. He wrapped himself in apostolic severity. His attacks of mystical confusion were much discussed. The after-effects of war could not be neutralised in him. He followed spiritualist inclinations. Travelled through the townzone region with a few trusted aides and women, showed interest in the beliefs churches temples of the sects. In the end he gathered preachers and teachers around him almost every week, listened, advised them to spread their pious transcendental thoughts widely among the population. White hair hanging long at the back and over his ears, he feared something was lacking. Nothing to him was as important as this.

Unremarked by him, his behaviour was boosting the numbers of opponents. The men and women who experimented and researched in the laboratories quietly clung to their old ideas. A Fronde, a league of hardened oppositionists, grew out of them, scions of the ruling clans. These were tolerated, especially in the Meki-factories, because the existence of all depended on their goodwill; in the end they constituted a sort of parallel government. They adhered rigorously to the decrees on monitoring the newly resurgent technologies, on the propagation of piety, on the continuing closure of factories and a return to agriculture, on livestock breeding. Marke's right hand, the head of his secret police, a steely cautious man, was won over to them, to their amazement. Soon they had an easy path. Prison cells where saboteurs of Marke's decrees languished – caught possessing or making weapons, defiant draughtsmen who designed power circuits in secret – were discreetly released. Those exiled to other zones were let back in.

And now Marke died, in squalor. He had been confined for weeks under doctor's orders. He was in fact a prisoner of his secret police chief. He lay day after day, parchment face fringed by a wild white beard, sprawled on the bed, dictating, issuing orders. Only women were with him at the end. He dreamed about the fruits of his regime. Believed he had set the city securely on a firm track. Tyrannised the women with his demands for food milk herbs poultices shaking up of pillows. Refused to see doctors. Endless death agony.

AN ASSEMBLY

MEGAPHONES bells fiery beacons summoned to assembly. Oppositionists emerged everywhere into the open. They experienced enormous disappointment.

Ligbau, a very old man, was helped to a megaphone outside the Council House, gesticulating as he expressed his disgust: "You are unmasked. We'd already noticed you and expected you. So it's to start all over again. You think you're so close to pulling it off. And you will pull it off. That's our fate. I advise all of you standing here: bow down to it. There's no point, don't try to stop it. It's meant to be, it's what we are, it's how we behave. Put the exiles and freed prisoners to good use. No half measures. Time is flying, don't bother with experiments and tests. For we know where that path leads. And everything is in place to make sure it all goes faster this time than in the war, the last war, the war before that. I'm eighty years old. I'm glad, I feel fortunate I won't need to die in bed. I needn't strive to die; that task will be lifted from me. A fine time: what surprises we shall see! Hurrah! Be joyful! They've thought it all through. Just ask them: it's there already in their books, on their drawing boards, blackboards. Look at their heads. It's all in there, everything that will rain down on us soon enough."

He raged and hissed. "Do you know the Spree and the Havel the Oder the Elbe? I think it is these they pray to. These are the gods of our new rulers. We're to be made the same as them. Mud and clay, thick and thin water. All torn apart and squeezed together. I'm no clairvoyant, didn't I take this from your own heads? I can say this because I'm an old man. Others, thirty years ago, just like you, they laughed the same way. Leuchtmar and Rallignon. You're no novelty. Your inventions are new; what you intend will be quite new, but you are old. There you are again, yes you there, you're already dead, died on the Sea of Azov with the B-Army, what a fine army, worthy of you. And here you are alive again. Your own discoveries, I thought, should have been enough to kill you. But you're having such a good time you can't allow yourself fifty years of sleep. Is she here, that woman who threw herself into the machine in southern Germany? Is she here, ha, you must be her. Hiding behind his back. No need for that. You're sitting in his head and in his body, in lots of heads out there; all of you eager to show us you're still here. Such novelties for an old man. Ha, such surprises. How can I find a joy like this? Such joy, and my hair so white!"

He gesticulated with the megaphone; no one understood. Someone tried to calm him. Below there were many who would not look up. He shouted: "Let me speak! Tell me first: is Marke dead? If he died in Crimea he couldn't have come home, or did he come home. His daughters hanged themselves. He put out his own eyes." He felt about himself, his sagging face fiery red, eyes starting from his head, fumbling squawking: "Let's vote! A new Consul! We made a war. The war has just ended. We have returned from the front. It was – a wasteland! Wasteland! The ruins of Nineveh are palaces compared to what we saw. The Euphrates still flows, foundation walls are still there, you can still find tiles, it's all there. But the land in Russia is a wasteland, the land is no longer there. The earth has been torn away. Craters that go down to the hot liquid core of the Earth. I vote – Marke! Vote with me! Marke! Citizens, no one but Marke should be Consul."

He was led to the side of the stage. A cool objective man spoke next, Ligbau in his wheelchair nearby. The old man with white eyes stared leaning forward at the speaker, called across: "What's in your head? What shall we die of – streams of poison, streams of gas! Say it!" When the man had finished he cried: "Vote for him! He'll lead you down the nearest path. We'll never meet again on this plaza." The speaker's wife stood beside her husband, scolded the old man, shook her fists. The old man stood up from his chair, mounted the podium, struck out at her throat: "You never dared do that then." She fell crying onto the podium, the man led her from the stage, scowling.

IN THE TREES

THEN MARDUK became Consul of the townzone. He was a pale man with a lofty brow, in his thirties, big serious eyes. Long bony face, calm steady gait on weak uncertain legs. Until now he had remained in the background, but in the days before the delayed election, as signs of anarchy appeared – in Mecklenburg scions of the old ruling clans re-emerged, in the Magdeburg region machine-breakers gathered around the old fanatic Ligbau – he had the courage to venture out from his base with a band of two hundred irregulars to a meeting with the Friends of Iron at Löwenberg, where he abducted the entire leadership of the movement and caused them to disappear, one and all. Until the end of his long consulship – he was in power right up to the mid-27th century – few knew the fate of those forty-two men and women.

Marduk, a man of the same stamp as those he had abducted, lived in the woods near Löwenberg, on the Mecklenburg border, near the main protein factory. A little grove of beech trees stood next to his workplace, behind walls. He had the forty-two detainees brought to this green leafy place. As they passed through the little gate they noticed burst trunks. A thick bubbling yellowish slime clung to the fissures, the gaping wounds. Where it trickled down the trunk to the roots it dried to a powdery rust. Nervously they called to mind Marduk's plant experiments, conducted always in seclusion. Rumour was that in the Meki laboratories he had induced curious growth changes in animal organ parts, and especially in plant matter.

The prisoners wandered in dismay through Marduk's grove, had no idea what their capture and abduction meant. Marduk was one of their own. Perhaps he had information about planned assaults on them; he was ensuring his colleagues' safety, detaining them temporarily. They expected him to appear at any moment and explain. From time to time in the chilly spring breeze there was a sense of something stirring at the shoulder, behind the back. They looked around, saw nothing. They came together, wandered apart. There was something strange in the air, acrid like thin smoke. The trees seemed to be emitting heat; in some places the trees were warm to the touch. Uneasily they turned their attention to the trees. When they placed an ear against a trunk they heard purring buzzing humming. It was sap; this was springtime. But it was remarkable how vigorously it moved through pith and xylem. Puzzled, they kept an ear against the trunk, listened here and there. Some trees sizzled as if boiling. Though no one had touched it, a leafy branch fell from a tree. A low hiss came from above, as of juices draining. That sharp thin tenuous smell was stronger around this trunk; they could not stay near it. The smell was acrid, like ammonia.

In their unease some had a notion to protect themselves from the trees, break them; they were young saplings. They tackled two trees, pulled tore at branches; one of them climbed up, tugged broke away big branches, pulled leaves, suddenly fell backwards stunned onto the ground among leaves. The tree was breathing, huffing out warm steam. They dragged the unconscious man away, retreated. Marduk did not appear. Towards evening food and drink were passed to them in baskets over the barbed wire atop the wall. They slept.

Towards four in the morning, as day broke, they sought each other out, expressed puzzlement. The trees had become much denser, the paths between the trunks so narrow. The trees had increased in girth, were misshapen. Two abreast could hardly squeeze by. A buzzing noise like the one they had heard the previous day filled their ears. They could not tell where it came from; dared not touch the trees. Although the clear light of morning penetrated the foliage – cocks crowing nearby, underground trains rattling – they could hardly see in any direction. Frightened groans here, groans there. Some took off jacket, shirt, to breathe more easily. The little grove was definitely growing. Some of the men and women lay fainting, others clambered frightened over them in a panic, knees trembling, pressed through the thicket as if feeling their way in a dark cellar. Some stood by the wall calling Marduk by name: "Mercy, Marduk!" Some tried again to go along paths that narrowed by the hour. Some sucked on fingers, berries, spat blood.

By nine o'clock that morning – sun blazing down, the same sun that shone on ships in the Atlantic Ocean and over children's playgrounds in the nearby town – a shrill maddened cry for help rang out from the park, a loud cry of woe as if wild beasts had come leaping. Most sank to the ground at that cry, faces pale. Those nearest the cry craned their necks, saw in the half-dark something flailing, kicking its feet. Feet and a flapping skirt. A woman. She was caught, her clenched arm like a plank, elbow and half her upper and lower arm stuck fast between two drooling trees. She stood between the encroaching swelling things, her back to them, tried to escape, bent down, her skirt was stuck, she turned, howled wailed roared: "Help me. Here! A knife."

The little grove crackled ceaselessly. Those below stood lay paced clustered drifted apart, were spattered with a sticky muddy dampness that fell on faces and hands like dribs of slime from a bird's beak, often a fine spray as from a sprinkler. The crackling was accompanied by a swishing and fizzing, as from an opened bottle that would end in asphyxiation. The trees merged branch with branch, jostled against each other. It grew darker. A roof, a wooden ceiling formed slowly over the prisoners. The wood thickened to a narrow ever narrower box, moisture trickling from the lid. The air fermenting bitter fusty, with swathes of choking irritant gases. But the ground, which minutes ago had been level, now bulged, coiled, slithered like a snake. Roots swelled like blisters, sand rolled from arm-thick veins. The ground was rising.

They sought open spaces between the dense ever denser trees, seemed not to recall that a few hours earlier every space had been open. They squealed annoyance when someone loomed from the half-dark. Often one of them jumped up, clothes discarded, jumped at a tree, clawed, bit. But the tree oozed repulsively, dribbled, was so moist, so warm; the

tongue stuck to it.

At ten o'clock – the clock at Marduk's house could clearly be heard – two men strangled themselves with their belts. First they silenced the woman with the squashed arm dangling panting between trees. It was pitch dark in most of the grove. Trees groaning crackling, running riot. A dreadful inner life was distending the rampant aroused plant-beings. You could see the monstrous barrel-shaped masses slowly turning spiralling, gaping open along their length, always swelling thicker, climbing higher, bleeding and yet always growing and steaming; bursting open, one cutting into the other and melding with it, hissing clattering. And wherever trees with their too-heavy crowns found space to fall into a gap between others, the stumps began rising pushing up again from the ground.

Birds fluttered in confusion among high branches; gradually descended. A bird would call scrabble flap about as soon as it landed; free wings and feet from sticky branches and leaves, whir up calling dropping feathers, search for a gap. Others hung tight, drilled pecked at the swelling wood, it held fast to the buried beak, would not let go, quickly grew over it around it, formed a cast around heart nostrils eyes, gluing coffining, ignored the little creatures' bracing flapping twisting back and forth and side to side. Thick goo rose over the dancing feet, the beating wings, tried to tamp them down. They danced around the trunks, were bedded in. Sap overran them. Now they dropped in multitudes from branch to branch, still flapping, scrabbled on the ground beside a human turning to look, onto his shoulder, next to his throat, lay beak closed, feet twitching. After struggling and turning belly-up, many became cemented to a branch, fell silent, lamed and senseless. They were absorbed by the tree, became a round beating blister on it, leaking sap, a quiet little knot, a flat button.

The mammoth dripping crackling growth squeezed jammed pulped mashed the prisoners, crushed the ribcage, broke the pelvis, pushed skull-bones together, sprayed white brain matter over roots. The trunks were in motion. Roots trunks crowns a single mass, a melded surging burrowing steaming hulk. Up above all was bursting, hissing. Down below it heaved gulped, pushed high and sideways to the walls.

ANTICHRISTS

MARDUK pressed his too-big head to the window. "It's finished now. Your lot can do nothing more." Jonathan Hatton, his young friend, who had been detained along with the others, stood facing him, laughed: "So, let it be."

"Don't laugh, Jonathan. And don't smile. There's really no need to smile. For ages you and the others showed no concern. You all thought it would happen without me."

"Marduk," the younger man came nearer, grave. "It was you, you withdrew from us."

"You'll see, it would be better if you'd concerned yourselves with me, if you'd watched what I've been up to."

"You refuse to associate with us, and then you complain."

Marduk scowled: "I don't need to associate with you. That's over now. Yes, Jonathan. You'll all be struck dumb. I've taken it off your hands. I don't want you lot working on it. Understand?"

"Yes and no. Marduk, tell me what you know, what you can do. I won't be shocked. I'm made of sterner stuff." Jonathan grinned: "What I – discovered – has never been discovered by anyone."

"Never discovered by anyone," scoffed Marduk, face averted.

"Marduk! Have I contributed so little? You and I both know that's not true. I've a right to see, a right to hear. Why forbid me to think?"

"Bring your friends here, Jonathan."

"But – you took them all prisoner. Surely?"

Marduk glowered at Jonathan. "Come, I'll show you." He waved away the guards at the door, went hatless alone with Jonathan, who was not in handcuffs. Across the lawn was a low long structure. They went in. They walked through the glass-roofed hall of the hot stuffy building, where scraps of plant matter lay in heaps, baskets, shallow boxes. They went on down to a broad unpaved courtyard; pipes emerged to run uncovered over the ground. Marduk opened a gate; there was a yard with many spaces individually fenced off; some were green and colourful, some thatched like a barn; in others whole stacks of weedy growth were mouldering. The land dropped away; over the slope, around the floor of the depression a dividing wall, behind it a hulking mass of black and green.

"Well, look here. You're a farmer, Marduk."

"Come." He pulled open a little iron gate in the wall. A fog loomed at them. No opening, no daylight. Trees pressed tight against the stone wall. They were stuck at the gate, could only go two steps down.

Jonathan pale, eyes too big, smiled: "What have we here."

"Keep going. Straight on."

"What is this. I'm not going in there."

"I was going to ask you to guide me, if I become shortsighted and can't find my way. Show me your friends. You

remember them better than I. Here's my hand, Jonathan. The path leads straight ahead."

But Jonathan had retreated up the steps. His chin jutted: "You're crazy, Marduk."

"Not at all. They must be in here."

Jonathan, after a glance at Marduk's vibrant face, stepped down, felt along the sticky steaming wall of wood. "Yes, they're tree trunks. Big thick trees. Where's the way in. I can't come through."

"Try here. Try. They're trying, from inside."

He scouted left and right over resin-dripping ground. "It's so mucky, all this resin, the mud. Why are you doing this? Where's the door?"

"Try calling out. Call out."

"Really?" He shouted.

The other shook his head. "They won't answer."

"You're making a fool of me."

"What do your friends look like, Jonathan, when they're tired, or happy?" (Jonathan, hanging on every word, groaned.) "There among the trees they're smiling. In the foliage, they're sitting there. They've become birds. They're so pretty, I had to hunt them down. As they fled from me they – metamorphosed into trees."

"You did this?"

"I did this. That's how strong I've become." Radiant, standing tall, he led the man in the blue cape – who said nothing, his movements sluggish – back through the gate across the sunlit yard to the long building. The same gloomy fog from the park was here too. Powder lay on the ground beside an open box; Jonathan bent down unthinking to pick some up. Marduk grabbed his hand: "Don't touch. You didn't swallow any? It's poison to animals and people."

Jonathan stared at the wilted rotting piles of plant matter. Marduk followed his gaze: "I can bring them on. In an hour. From one half hour to the next." Fantastical dried grasses lay spread out on the stone flags. "Can I do nothing?" He stretched his arms, flexed his fists: "This I can do. This I can do. Now I shall bury your friends. A good thing they no longer have human form, are no longer like us. They are in the trees. I shall bury them."

Jonathan had already turned, was striding back through the building. He rubbed his hands unthinking, eyes downcast. They hurried across the yard, bright in the spring sun. Jonathan's cape slipped from his shoulder, Marduk went to pick it up, he shrugged him away, hurried on. At the slope down to the wall Jonathan tried to go on, but the other man confronted him: "Now show me what you can do. Now you must show me something."

Jonathan stood rigid, stammered, his open face twisted in a grimace. "Don't be afraid, Jonathan. Nothing will happen to you. You can show me. I'm a connoisseur, a professional. I know the value of this."

"Marduk, who did you bury in the trees? Were there women too? Are they all there, those you abducted?"

"All of them. In the lion's cage. The arena."

"All? Women too?"

"All. Forty-two. They could have put up a struggle. No lions or tigers, only trees to fight. They were fighting for a new religion. It was a latter-day Christian persecution. No, a persecution of Antichrists."

"Marduk," cried Jonathan, weeping, raising his arms. The older man went on: "Yes, Antichrists. I play the Christian. I won't let them set up idols. They must all bite the dust."

"Marduk. My mother was one of them."

Marduk shook a clenched fist: "So what. So what if your mother was there, if your wife and child were there, if you were there. It won't make it better. Just feel it. You must feel it. No one can escape. Not even me. It's good we have this hanging over us, that we feel it so near. Ha, now you feel it, you, right under your skin. Good. Good. I'm glad they were all there."

Marduk's teeth chattered, a chill came over him. It had turned on him, this weapon he had aimed at others. He was losing Jonathan. "A marvellous discovery, no? Say something. We're connoisseurs. No one can match us. What do you think of the trees down there. Not a hand's breadth of gap anywhere. Like a cabinet, joints nice and tight. Isn't it marvellous, my discovery?" He shook him. "Listen, if you don't answer it'll go badly for you. I shall – let you live. Then at least I can be the one to kill you."

"Do it, Marduk, damn you! You devil!"

"Damned, me? Devil, me?"

Jonathan sank back in a faint. There was a grey capsule at Marduk's chest, on a chain. He pulled it out, opened the capsule, shook grey powder onto a finger. He bent down to push it between Jonathan's pale lips. Then he flung the rest of the powder away, fell on the unconscious man's body, groaned hate-raged even as the man gurgled, tried to sit up.

They stood glaring at each other. Down there the black bulk of trees behind the wall. Marduk pressed his lips together: "I am prepared to put myself at your service. I – do so without conditions."

Jonathan, brightly: "That's no good to me, if you're dead."

"Do what you must."

For two weeks Jonathan wandered along the Baltic coast. He was blind to the earth, to trees. Marduk had the townzone region firmly in his grip. Then Jonathan, lanky, tanned, went to him, calm pale gaunt, held out a hand, offered his services. Marduk regarded him a long minute:

"I have no rights over the city. I have rights only over myself. Do you want rights over me?"

"All I want is to stand by you."

The older man stayed silent. Spoke slowly: “You will destroy every building and facility, Jonathan, which still contains apparatus and equipment of ours, of yours. Not all have been destroyed yet, or even brought to light. And you will give me the names of all the men and women known to you who worked alongside you and are still alive.”

The slim young man held his gaze. He named several names. Marduk assigned thirty armed men to go with him. A few hours later, in the bright noontime, he stood before the Consul with fifteen men and six women. Jonathan was wearing the green gown and bright blue cape he had worn when first brought before Marduk; they still showed dirt from Marduk’s yard.

In the quiet controlled way he had affected since returning from the coast, Jonathan stood at Marduk’s side, loosened his cape and named each person. Before the hearing was concluded he fainted. He was not present that evening when the fifteen men and six women were taken away and shot.

The Consul in his black silk cape, big serious eyes cast down, strolled early next day through the city. A warm wind was blowing. Fliers sped through the air with a dull roar. Huge plazas. Giant metal beasts, knife in the flank, sinking in silence to the stone pedestal. He let the bustling activity wash over him. Flags limply flapping, covered courts where men and women played with racquet and ball. Nothing had changed since he became Consul. Bright red buildings with masts and bunting where synthetic food was distributed, on their roofs sinuous identification marks for the freight fliers. Main exits from the underground railways close to the food depots; rumble and hum of trains arriving from factories and central storehouses, of trains deeper down on radial and peripheral lines supplying the districts, a lift shaft up to every building.

Jaunty gait of men of the southern type. Nonchalantly strolling whistling smoking, descendants of mulattos with grey faces, squashed noses; triumphant radiance of white women; the dull businesslike bustle of tall foreigners, their listless calm as they sat in places set aside for drinking smoking, low voices, expressions seldom changing. Priests in golden robes went down the streets, singing calling enticing. Marduk’s eyes burned into it all, his breath faltered. Strange how women had retreated to the background. They had changed fastest; as the exciting times faded seemed to have lost energy, refashioned themselves as mothers, even servants of their menfolk.

Jonathan, in gold silks like a priest, brown head bare, stepped lightly at Marduk’s side, smiled when the other looked sideways at him. Jonathan wanted to travel outside the city; Marduk held him back: “Have patience. Don’t withdraw, Jonathan. I understand. The monstrous unfathomable spell we live under. Look around you.”

From a distance came the horrible bellow of a metal bull. At once the street fell silent, people slowed, stood, looked down at the paving. Marduk gazed through them, held Jonathan’s arm, clearly not in control of himself; his shoulders shook, his eyes were moist: “Do you know the city? It’s like a wind that comes to my mouth and holds my face. I journey through the wind. Look at these men, the women the railway, fliers, streets, you heard the bull. The Meki-house, Marke the blind consul, I myself, you; all so delightful. How it delights me, fills me, blesses me. Drunk, Jonathan.”

Jonathan took his arm. The older man with the big burning eyes spoke on. Suddenly Jonathan turned aside, his shoulders shook with silent sobs. Marduk waited at the gate to a little garden. “You came back too soon, Jonathan. You should have stayed a while longer by the Baltic.”

Jonathan’s eyes darkened: “Haven’t I given you enough proof?” He looked almost tenderly at the other man. “I – don’t want to forget my mother. I have – given birth to her again, in sorrow. As she gave birth to me.” He sighed. “Look at that oak. Look hard into the leaves. Then I can tell you. Don’t look away. She came to me. My mother. At the seaside. Little by little. I saw her in the water, clearly. First I saw – her arm. Oh, the arm – it was crushed. How I squirmed. It moved, the fingers opened and closed. It twitched. But Marduk, I – I could make it keep still. It stopped. And the same with the other arm. I could make all the fingers move, slowly. And then the shoulders, my mother’s shoulders. I often used to lay my head on her shoulder. When I touched her shoulder I was back home. I didn’t – recognise the shoulders. You must keep looking at the leaves, Marduk. Good. The shoulder was split, as if something had cleaved it in two. Or it had come apart. I couldn’t make it better however hard I tried. I spent hours, Marduk, just trying to make the shoulder better, bring the parts together. But then they came together. And the arms were there and the fingers slowly moving. At first I couldn’t see the head. I wasn’t at all sad that she had a flower between her shoulders instead of a head, a corn poppy, limp red shiny petals, some hanging down, and I could see a dark pod inside with dust coming out. It looked to me like an eye. She had such dark eyes. And when evening came there were her eyes. Really they were there. She was wearing a red hat with red ribbons and was so friendly to me. For hours I couldn’t move, there on the beach. I was afraid the shoulder would split again. But I managed to keep it together, though I had to hold my breath for long moments. Then I went supperless to bed. Lay all night stiff as a corpse. When I woke and went down to the water, I stopped in the exact same spot. Does it bother you, staring into the leaves? It helps me tell the story better. Finally I managed to make her whole, alive and moving, fully dressed. So she came away from your grove. Through a gap. I had such a terrible struggle. It worked. Now it’s all better again.”

“Does she speak?”

“Not yet. I’m working on it. I can manage anything.”

“She’ll curse me, you’ll see.”

“I don’t think so. She can see me. She knows where I am.” Jonathan gazed into the distance, his face proud. For a moment, seeing the younger man suffer so, Marduk meant to push him away. He was afraid the young man would weaken him and force him to give up. He thought: I empathise with him and keep going. He is my sorrow and my guide. I shall preserve him as long as he stays like this. For as long as he suffers and cannot help himself, he shall remain alive –

so that I don't forget.

He said: "Stay by me, Jonathan. Your only duty will be to show me your face. You don't need to speak. Rain and warmth don't speak, yet we still enjoy them. And you won't be my servant. Not even my assistant. And not even my dining companion. But often at my side."

"Strange, Marduk. I thought you wanted me as your assistant."

Marduk yawned: "So it's a deal."

THE USURPER

MARDUK had entered the undefended city with his few hundred men. On the day he marched in he had a power transformer installed in the main Council House, where he set up his quarters. Weapons of assault and defence that he and others in his group had kept hidden and ready were swiftly concealed near the Council House and connected to Marduk's transformer.

The usurper summoned the leaders of those industries that still existed, owners of seigneural estates, men women, to the Council House and made sure as they crossed the courtyard that they caught sight of the fifteen men and six women who had been shot, together with thirty new detainees who were still alive pacing nervously about the yard. He talked at the assembled people, these creatures greyhaired and young, brightly clad, curious haughty shy.

Glossing, an old man of English ancestry, Marduk's mentor in chemical and physiological experiments, a fine botanist, looked up with a bored sardonic expression at the high dome of the hall and the silk flags waving below it, ancient fraternity insignia, flags of the Anglo-American mother empire, those from the Urals War with stars caught in flames emanating from the Earth. He thought: Marduk will make a speech. Let him; others will speak and act, but they won't change a thing. His thoughts were robust calm sure: no one can do away with me and my kind. His cool appraising glance took in those around him. What a fool Marduk was to come among such as these; he had firm hold of the reins; who would be tempted to give him trouble.

Moving gently through the throng, forever adjusting the large spectacles on his broad nose, Blue Sittard, of Creole blood. He sunned himself in the faces of those around, clandestine experimenter in crystal of whom wonderful things were told. His right hand was once caught in a stone-grinding machine, crushed all the way to the metacarpals. With the stump, which had been shaped into something like fingers, he could make little nodding movements, shocking anyone who didn't know when, seemingly inadvertently, he removed the bright green leather glove and gesticulated with the hand, which even had pink artificial nails and a diamond ring on each "finger". A cold lascivious soul. Marduk would give a speech. So let him speak. [1]

All watched agog as the adventurer entered, he who had managed this coup with the aid of a few men and weapons, surely only to regret it in a month or so. Marduk, in the Senate President's chair, doffed his broad-brimmed hat with the red feather, welcomed everyone. There was a stir in the crowd when Jonathan, at a sign from Marduk, sat beside him. All knew him, few had known of his attachment to Marduk.

Marduk, seated, made his report. Marke's work will continue. Lessons from the Urals War will be learned fully and rigorously. The current Senate will be recognised as long as it cooperates. Then he fell silent, sweat dripping, squinted down at the leather desktop. Since there was no movement in the crowd he invited old Glossing the botanist, former President, to come up. He misspoke, named Blue Sittard with the big spectacles, who pressed close to the podium to fix him with an ironic smile.

With a phlegmatic nod, Glossing took his seat beside Marduk, muttered, made him interrupt himself as those he named clustered at the podium: it would be a brief session, he hadn't called it, someone was in his seat – Marduk stood up angrily; Glossing declining, thank you – Did anyone have something to say, was anyone thinking to say something.

Blue Sittard raised a hand, mounted the first step to the podium, smiled ironically first at Marduk then at Jonathan, smirked at the crowd.

"We're all very grateful to Marduk and to you, Jonathan, for inviting us to be present in this chamber, to stand here listening to you. All delighted to be here. Don't take it amiss, Marduk, Jonathan, but we almost prefer to be in this chamber than to be with you. No mockery or hostility against you is intended, for we understand each other well, being good acquaintances, working colleagues, I would almost say: brothers in peril. For now we may say it out loud: under Marke we engaged, with him, in various activities that were not popular. And why do we prefer to be in this chamber than to be with you? Because we have often been present here, and every time, there where Marduk now sits, there sat or stood a – oh, now you'll laugh again, Jonathan. We like to see you laugh, usually. We have heard what sorrow fell upon you at the loss of a person whom many among us also revered and loved. It does us good to see how quickly a healthy nature prevails over misfortune and adversity; may we ourselves gather strength from this.

"Who used to be up there, I was going to say, where Mr Marduk now sits? A Consul whom we had elected. It's true,

there he was. Really. And that gives us joy. Now you may ask, Marduk, having spoken so kindly to us: what difference is there between you and Consul Marke? This is a question, a matter that has interest beyond the merely formal. I was expecting any moment to be interrupted, but you have the great goodness to listen to me, almost as a friend. And to be honest, Marduk: let's suppose that you, lacking patience, have made use of rights that undoubtedly belong to you, I would still have no idea how to avoid the question." He turned his pugnosed face fully towards the hall, sunned himself in the audience's gaze; several looked away.

"Speak then, Blue Sittard," said Marduk from his high seat.

Sittard bowed, grinned more broadly at Marduk and the President: "I thank you. I thank too His Honour the President, on whose behalf Marduk has just spoken, as his representative. All of us here are overjoyed that we are allowed to speak, and to speak thus. Otherwise: the Muses fall silent under the sword, as they say; but one sees exceptions. This is not to say that I am a Muse; Blue Sittard with his spectacles and bad hand does not see himself as a Muse. But half an hour ago a most artistic sentiment came over me, over this old man. I was on my way to this chamber, crossing the courtyard, and there I encountered some men and women well known to me. These men and women whom I know so well, have often met and spoken to, some indeed have even sat with me at the dinner table – some I greeted and shook hands with just a few days ago – all suddenly fell silent at the sight of me. I had not injured them in any way, nothing in the slightest had occurred between us. They kept so obstinately silent, their gestures so adamant, almost hostile, that I assumed: these men and these women will never speak again. Their mouths were wide open, they lay on the ground quite at ease, the paving seemed to cause them no discomfort. They seemed so determined, these our friends, they did not even let out a breath. Now of course, for these silent personages it's their private business. Nevertheless I would ask you, Marduk, since you came here from another direction: instead of simply looking through the window, would you send a couple of men and women down to investigate whether these silent people have met with something bad, with disaster perhaps."

Marduk said nothing. Glossing beside him kept his eyes down. "Will you allow us, Mr Marduk, to investigate why these fifteen men and six women stay so obstinately silent. Especially as you have the goodness to allow us to speak."

Marduk seemed unruffled by Sittard's tone: The men and women were shot last night, on his orders.

Blue Sittard lifted his arms in a friendly, almost delighted gesture. "It's really marvellous in a way how someone can hold their breath so long. Made me quite confused, brought on a lyrical ferment, the capacity, the stamina of these twenty-one people. But the horrific question remains: what are we doing here. Twenty-one victims are lying there in the courtyard. And we –." He gave a shout of laughter, his face very pale, tugged at his grey mutton-chop whiskers, suddenly stretched out his arms, made many low bows in Marduk's direction: "That's how it stands. Forgive me. Please forgive me. I wanted to make it known."

He turned to his friends, bowed again in confusion, tried to push into the crowd. Suddenly something darted at him from the motionless still seated Marduk. Friends pushed towards him from the doorway, from near the podium where Jonathan sat. He let them surround him, a pitiful smile on his lips. And only when he was among them, many ahead, two behind, two at each side, did he duck his head, lift his shoulders, utter shrill whining fearful noises, squeak from a constricted throat, hands at his mouth to suppress the sounds, rub his face so that the spectacles were pushed onto his forehead. Like a child who must go down a long flight of stairs, calm and bold at first, one at a time, stands still on each step, holds its breath, looks around, looks back, steps faster, faster, clings tight to the satchel, glides down the banister, fear, panicky fear at its back. The child runs, can't hold back, trip leap trip on, yelling into the lofty stairwell. And when people come out of their apartments with lamps, the child is standing at a window, staring pointing all around, panting dumbstruck, knows not what to say, heart beating in its mouth lips eyes, over the skull; chokes, hiccups, howls at the lights. Just so the whimpering of Blue Sittard. His friends clustered around him in concern. Marduk calmly from above: "Give him air."

"No," he whimpered, huddled tighter among them.

"I want to look at him." He burrowed into his friends, who were bewildered, there was a vibrating in them. Behind them someone opened doors. Their hands shook the possessed Blue Sittard: "What are you doing to us. Pull yourself together."

Now fear began to stream from them too, made them ask questions. They stumbled, turned about, pushed towards the doors. Their words were aimed at no one. Jonathan leaned towards Marduk, who turned his ash-grey face away. "Keep them in check," groaned Jonathan. [2]

Marduk from the podium, menacing: "What is it, Blue Sittard. What about the dead bodies?"

Sittard whimpered: "He can – he can –." And now he had it: he swung his arms, howled: "He can do it. He can bring them back to life. Dead bodies."

Marduk stood, let his laugh ring out: "I'll show you. I can bring them back to life."

They flooded outside in panic. Horrors of the Urals War.

Marduk slumped back in his chair, ground his teeth, snapped the fingers of his dangling hand. [3] He pulled himself together, swelled. He glanced with a seeming smile at Jonathan, who was standing one step down. "You still here? I think I've shown weakness coming here. Stepping into Marke's shoes. What is Marke to me. I should have stayed with my experiments. The fire-mines were nothing. [4] They've run away like hares. Haha, I'm a fool to sit here. I shall bring the dead back to life. And make all the living dead. Haha. Come along. I want to watch them out there."

Jonathan stayed put. Marduk brushed past. He stomped down the steps glowering snorting, ignored Jonathan: "We

have great powers, he believes it of me, Blue Sittard, the fat man. I shan't fail to obey him. He must not be gainsaid." [5]

Jonathan hurried after Marduk, who stormed into the courtyard, was in a trance. "This did not come to me from anyone. It lay concealed in me. Prophets and holy men have spoken of it. I shall make miracles happen. It's earth-shaking. Not allow dying. Then I must do more: create new life, pour out new lives, different lives. Let Nature grind her teeth."

They stood in the courtyard. The living prisoners were hustled aside. He hurried towards the corpses laid out in three rows on the stone flags. A female corpse, leg bare to above the knee. Thin pale yellow legs drawn up under the tarpaulin, toes splayed sticking up in the air. Marduk bent to touch a foot. His hand enclosed the whole foot around the instep; after a while he let go; the foot exuded a stinging penetrating chill. He stood and crossed his arms. Went past the heads of the third row. A man, face covered by a straw hat, had his elbows out as if holding something in his hands and sewing. Marduk grabbed an elbow. It came up. And when he pulled harder the man rolled his whole body onto the side like a log, rolled back when he let go. The hat fell from his face; an elderly pot-bellied man with a bald skull; his forehead wore an anxious frown, he was staring past his nose. The upper lip was torn, bloody splintered jawbone lay exposed. When Marduk lifted his hand from the face, the old man was still frowning, still staring down his nose.

Marduk replaced the tarpaulin. Sun dazzling overhead. Crisp black shadows around the courtyard. He wanted to turn away, but a groan came from behind. Jonathan was there, eyes fixed on the covered corpse, wiping tears from his cheeks. He followed Marduk to the gate.

The older man, as he strode along the gallery, murmured to himself: "It was right to leave them there. We'll build on this." Pulled his belt tighter, slunk along with guards in his wake. Jonathan stared after him in disgust.

Next morning Jonathan entered Marduk's reception room in the City Hall, offered his hand. "Are you surprised to see me, Marduk? No, you won't be surprised, you let nothing surprise you."

It was a fine room, a hall almost; Marke had decorated it. Left and right huge artworks from floor to ceiling. On one side balks of colour, beams cables machine parts, jutting as if there were no holding them back. On the other side, inundations piles of rubble, expiring animals and people. A pyramid of bones and skulls in the middle of the room. Jonathan was startled: "You live here, Marduk."

No answer. Then, from behind the desk: "What do you bring me."

"I don't know. But I can't live with hostility between us." He looked away: "I apologise for my thoughts yesterday. And beg you never to speak of them, never mention them to me."

"I think, Jonathan, that you are here not for my benefit, but for yours."

"I can't find peace with you, Marduk. You want me to be your mirror. I want to be more than a mirror. I have two hands, a head, feelings, for I am your friend."

"Let's eat together. No more talk." Marduk took the younger man by the arm; they went into the little narrow annex, for a long time said nothing as they ate. Marduk thought: He's submissive because he grieves for his mother. He eats a lot because I'm here beside him. He sits quietly. He does not look askance. He keeps smiling at me. What a tormented creature. And he has to make friends of a cold creature like me. I'm as much a friend to him as the bread the wine there. I'm a necessity of life to him; he was looking for a way to escape. Marduk leaned back: "Today I plan to talk to some of those I have frightened. I must calm them down. I shall fly to my country estate, present them with a few decrees." He stopped; the thought came into his head: What profit to possess all the wisdom of the earth, and have no love.

Jonathan softly, calmly: "I'll be glad to come with you."

Marduk, aiming higher: "We'll take these worthy gentlemen to see our experiments in the interruption and promotion of growth in younger and older animals."

"As you like," Jonathan nodded, to Marduk's profound astonishment. "I'm just glad you don't hold anything against me."

When the Consul stood up, as if to shake something from him, he felt he was alone. [6] He had ventured to cast others down so he could stand over them; had abandoned everything. What had he left behind, what was this new thing he had gained. Dominion over them. Over everything. What. What. "Cursed," he groaned. The glass in his slack hand tipped, red wine dribbled onto the carpet. Reluctance, self-repudiation, disgust as fingernails bored into the palm: Jonathan saw it all as he leaned towards him. [7] The younger man spoke in a veiled gentle tone: "You must tell me about your experiments, the most recent ones. Don't worry, you can tell me." [8]

DEPOPULATION

THE VICTIMS were given a public funeral next day. The Consul joined the solemn procession. He declared he had no wish to exact revenge, spread terror. That evening the earth shook as it had at the start of Marke's consulship: numerous facilities and research stations that had come to light, including Marduk's own, were blown up.

He gathered around him many loyal men and women, who carried weapons, installed and made ready systems for attack and defence. Like a tyrant he surrounded himself with spies and watchers.

During his consulship the population of the zone's urban areas decreased by millions. Immigration ceased entirely. Marduk not only blew up experimental and operational bases, but in rapid succession destroyed any factories and facilities he considered unnecessary. This attack on the property of the biggest ruling groups pauperised them. The systematic destruction of facilities that provided comforts and convenience and also the basis of exchanges with other townzones led to the exclusion of Berlin from all industrial trade, and thus to further depopulation. Marduk had full control of the Meki-factories, but forced people out into the wilderness of forests and fields, using robust measures. The first real revolt happened when, without consulting the Senate, he blew up several foodstuff depots. He destroyed the facilities but left the structures standing, their slow noisy crumbling signified his desire to instil outright aversion to synthetic food.

The Senate, which soon comprised a majority of earnest Consul loyalists – many rebellious souls had withdrawn, disheartened and weary, to other zones near and far – came out in opposition. From every part of the townzone, people came to the Council House with their slack apathetic features, thin unsteady limbs, big bodies; also some more vigorous tillers of the soil. Hordes of children were let loose. All were alarmed: they would die; anyone who did not own a piece of land, a cow, would starve. Outside the fortress-like Council House they called for Marduk, who kept out of sight; demanded his dismissal. People scattered to protect undamaged Meki-factories and facilities, organised guard rosters. Marduk let this go on for weeks. When the Senate declined to calm the people, the Consul made known that he himself would protect the facilities. Everyone was free to emigrate. The agitated crowds took no notice of Marduk's warning. Now land-settlers came to his aid. After a number of unruly people were cleared from the depots and facilities, and some of Marduk's guards inside the buildings were rendered harmless, the revolt dissipated. More streams of people flowed out from the ever more desolate land. [9]

Marduk's policies did not change. For a year his hand lay less heavy on the townzone. He vegetated morose and bitter, ageing almost by the month. Seemed listless, his work driven only by habit. [10] Those close to him felt he could be steered with a finger's touch. People grew insolent, neglected to demolish Meki-factories, busied themselves with street clearances, the productivity of cropland. [11]

For the first time in years Marduk appeared at a sitting of the Senate, unannounced, sat not saying a word and then left. He came often, listened, went. His troubled restless rambles through the zone. Once, in the northern section of the city, he was rendered unconscious in unexplained circumstances, perhaps by an invisible gas, was found at once by his security detail trailing close behind. His evident despair when Jonathan visited him: "Looks like I'm in a trap. How long before it snaps shut. They watch me from every side. They're armed. They are busy. I can do nothing. Nothing."

Suddenly in a panic he urged Jonathan to see if anyone was at the door. He broke into a fit of crying. "They can do nothing. I'm watching them. Before the Urals War it was nothing, and it's nothing now. We should all die. I haven't seen you for so long. Do you know what day it is today? The anniversary of my entry into the city." [12]

He pulled Jonathan through the door to a window across the corridor. "Look at it. There's the city. Remember how full the streets were. What the buildings looked like and all the things I've done. There's the city. It's a swamp, gone to seed, decaying. Like Marduk's face." The younger man stared at him in silence. [13] "Without my weapons I'd have gone years ago. They blame me for ruining them, sending them out to the fields." [14]

He stepped back into the room. "I am not to blame for this wretchedness. Not I. I can do no more. I can throw this chair across the room: people are like that, all they do is stumble and fall when you grab them. We lack something. What is it we lack. I've given all I can, Jonathan. I can do no more. Thousands have run away. They'll have my head in the end. As if it meant anything. I'm ready to surrender. But – I won't. Bad as I am, there are worse than me." He shivered. "We're all dying. Where is salvation." [15]

When Jonathan offered his hand in parting, Marduk held it tight. "I'll never visit him again," thought the younger man as he went down the icy steps. "Let him kill me, put me in prison, use every device of martyrdom. I'll never visit him again." A tremendous revulsion against Marduk rose in him. He walked through a park. "The disgrace that man has heaped on me." He spat out his disgust. [16]

Marduk was wavering at this time. He who had sat in solitude at the centre now went about in evident uncertainty, looked here, looked there, asked questions. His bodyguard often had to beg him to take care, he was placing himself in danger. He was seen walking the streets with a dog, a big strong creature. When the dog disappeared, this perilous stage of Marduk's rule was over. He no longer walked the streets, became again the decisive man of old, who, as many said, was intent on nothing so much as the depopulation of the townzones.[17]

MARCHERS

IN THE YEARS of Marduk the townzone was almost a military camp. There was little violence; Marduk's forces patrolled in strength. Everywhere people spoke of him with reverence. Berlin, which once lurked in houses and factories, now bestrode fields and open plazas. People sought contact. A sense of uncertainty and unreality lay over it all.

At this time, a number of vengeful exiles turned Magdeburg into an armed base against Berlin. Marduk, gloomy prowler, struck back furiously in raging contempt for the exiles; he organised a swift attack. In the zone it was said he needed only to wait for the traitors who'd surely appear, the donkeys the miserable carcasses numbskulls. He remained in Berlin, despatched Lucio Angelelli, the silent black captain of his guard, to Magdeburg. He disabled the long-distance flamethrowers, they had no chance against the sweep of his death-dealing rays. Since the collapse of the League of States there was no longer uniformity in armaments. Exchanges and mutual supervision no longer occurred, real fighting was now possible.

For two weeks Lucio Angelelli paraded the captured leaders of the conspirators, more than five hundred men and women, all around and through the townzone region. He called people together in fields and parks. In the smoke of the *fata morgana* from Marke's time, he showed how he had executed a bunch of conspirators the day before. Then he carried out judgement on another bunch as metal bulls kept up a continual bellowing throughout the zone. Simple beheadings dismemberments stranglings were supplemented by crueller methods. [18] He, Marduk's right hand, made manifest the power they possessed. [19]

Around this time Marduk deemed it necessary to extend Berlin north towards Mecklenburg, to secure more land for agriculture. The Senate, working hand in hand with him, proposed to annex Demmin and Anklam and take over the fertile fallow ground from Stralsund to Anklam. Only now did the thought float up: how arbitrary the boundaries of the townzones, what vast expanses of land lie idle between them.

South of the Elbe lay the mighty townzone Leipzig. West of Magdeburg ruin after ruin, collapsed empty towns, former "special cities", obsolete industrial districts. Hannover and Hamburg the nearest zones to the west, with their own Meki facilities, powerful energy devices, filled with idle apathetic millions watched over by jealous senatorial cliques, descendants of the great ruling clans, each intent on imposing tyranny. The masses, complacently mocking, almost contemptuous, looked on the actions of their rulers as on a wretched game. Unconstrained, the Berlin Senate pressed hard against Hannover, which controlled Brunswick Wolfenbüttel Hildesheim Celle. The westerners, almost out of curiosity, tolerated the influx of people from the east into empty land, to settle and toil as if Meki-factories power plants did not exist.

Long-abandoned coalmines from an earlier age were discovered. Tillers of the soil wandered the dark tunnels and shafts, the open pits. No cattle or sheep could graze here, no wheat rye oats would grow. They avoided the vast forbidding sites. But Marduk's agents came behind probing, observing. The thought had not so far arisen of doing away even with the power transmission grid. The dark pits and tunnels drew them with ineffable force. Fling people at the mines, here, this very spot, bring up load after load of what grows here: forget Scandinavian waterfalls.

Livestock herders stared as if at a miracle at the shiny crumbling rock from which heat and light could be struck. The region was huge and sparsely populated. "We'll force them. When you're freezing you look for warmth. They'll sit up in the evenings." Giant cables from the Scandinavian waterfalls were severed by these fanatical enemies of the devices, who launched rumours: people would be forced to join the new Communal League the westerners were now forming.

The Berlin townzone – the ancient Brandenburg Marcher region – now hurled itself at the urban industrial giant Hannover. In a few days scythed away the town's greatness. Blew up, laid waste, drove out tens of thousands. Through Brunswick Hildesheim Celle Wolfenbüttel stomped Marcher men and women. They aroused horror and revulsion; knew nothing of the local cultures beyond weaponry and explosives. Hunger and death accompanied them into the overwhelmed zones. They were not many, but selected for strength in muscle and bone, coarsely garbed. They squatted in the ruined towns. Their thoughts were raw. Gloomy creatures of many races, a species created by the regimes of Marke and Marduk. Anyone from the west approaching them could see: these people are troubled, glowering, ready for a fight, a fermenting fearsome mass of humanity. The Marchers roamed rode over Luneburg Heath, along the Aller and Weser rivers, overcame populations not so much by the weapons and devices they dragged behind them as by tricks and audacity, raw strength. The Berlin Senate had delegated violence to the leaders of war-bands.

MEETING WITH MARDUK

IN THE 27TH century the Continent was in a state of wild ferment. What began in Berlin under consuls Marke and Marduk – isolation from neighbouring states, destruction of central plants – happened, intensively or more superficially, at the same time in western townzones. Strong contacts with neighbouring states still existed, though not many: the skeleton of the giant edifice did not collapse. Monstrous fate of zones to the south and west in the times that followed: masses exterminated ruined, desperate leagues of states against other tyrannical states. But everywhere counter-movements

emerged. Clever unscrupulous active men and women in London knew how to contain the flow on the Continent within its banks. The only solution, twenty or thirty years after the Urals War, was to shape anew the connections among peoples.

London tried to win dangerous Marduk over. He was held in high regard by the bitterly warring senates of the Continent, maintaining contact as he did with other capitals through various means. The hopelessness of his cause was clear to all. But when he began to extend his territory, fears grew.

Francis Delvil and Nelson Pimber from the London Senate sought him out, together with Mrs White Baker. All three strong devious personalities, grown up among a dangerous population, eager to draw Marduk to their side but not prepared to tolerate his violence. In the broad lands of the Berlin townzone they failed to find the subjugated puny unarmed population, glum sullen slaves they had expected. People spoke of Marduk with pride and love. The dangerous fire directed into the zone from its borders had sparked a different fire within the zone itself. As the three foreigners flew over the country, they saw a line of fortress-like encampments and a number of curious installations they could not identify, doubtless serving some martial purpose. In other zones, the metal bulls so common after the Urals War no longer roared; here they bellowed on every side, time had stood still. There were only small pockets of decaying idlers, apathetic or reckless people. The sparsely populated region between Elbe and Oder was crisscrossed by extraordinarily energetic men and women; they had adopted Marduk's fanatical views, were indifferent to his tyranny; to these he entrusted rather harmless weapons.

In the Council House full of bellicose faces they approached the big grey-haired figure who stood as usual in Consul Marke's famous reception chamber with its pyramid of skulls, wall paintings of the Urals war of flames. Francis Delvil gestured to the skulls: Seems people here don't forget. Marduk extended a bony hand, gave a cold smile: Whether they forget or not isn't up to them. He was wearing a brown jacket: Just as this never forgets to be brown when light falls on it, so on waking I never forget the past. But the brown fades, turns grey, the fabric frays. "I wouldn't be a man if I did that," said the Consul equably, not looking up. After a while, as they all four studied the dreadful wall of flaming mineworks, Marduk again: "And if I could – could forget; why would I? You've come to speak with me. To what do you hope to persuade me?"

Delvil: "Marduk, we flew over the whole zone. No one stopped us looking where we wanted. You've expanded the frontiers of your region. We saw men and women toiling away. It affected us. Just one thing we don't understand: what's it all for? You're clever. This whole thing is futile. We feel sorry for you and those people. We see no sense in what you're doing."

"Go on."

"What happened in Marseille Florence Chicago, endless battles, the to and fro of unrest and flight, you know all about it. We're glad you've always remained in sympathy with us, never shut yourself away as absolutely as people say. Are all these struggles good? What alternative do you envisage?"

"By what authority do you care about Chicago and Florence?"

Mrs White Baker, at a nod from Delvil, said: "I'll tell you, Marduk. Our authority does not arise from the fact that we rule Chicago and Florence, could perhaps destroy them. The cities are ruining themselves, we can't just leave them to it."

"So let them go to ruin. Haven't you heard, White Baker, that there is such a thing as death? How do you conceive of death? How does death appear to us, what is dying? Look at these cities, and others you've not named, those not yet displaying the worst most serious signs of death. This is what death looks like. Let them die."

The stocky ruddy-faced woman stepped closer to Marduk: "It will turn on us eventually. But we can defend ourselves against death."

Marduk banged the table: "Defend yourselves – you cannot. None of us can. Not even if I come over to you. I don't flinch from it. I won't."

"You mean we are dying. No, Marduk, it's you who are helpless. Here is where death is."

"So you say. I don't even believe you mean it."

The woman controlled herself, bristled: "Don't laugh at us, Marduk. You see we came here, the three of us."

"To help me? You are my guests. I didn't summon you."

"The world is coming together."

"To bring me to my knees? Let it!"

"We're not here on behalf of eternity. You may be right to see signs of death in us. We don't see any, feel any, we help each other on from day to day. Listen, Marduk, please, join us in our work, transient though it may be. And – Delvil laughs so merrily, let him speak for me."

"I think it's no trivial work we do, Marduk. I'm glad events are proceeding as they are. We are enthusiasts, we three. Things will go well, they will."

"Delvil, Pimber, Baker, thank you for coming, for sharing this with me. I tell you clearly: you will find me opposed to these things that go well."

Delvil stood up slowly; Marduk stepped back. "We won't make war on you, Marduk. There's no need. You'll go down without a war."

"You're sure of that, Delvil?"

"Yes."

Marduk stepped close: "How can you say this. So little regard for me that you say this." He turned away, took up his

old defensive stance by the flaming mineworks.

Outside the Council House goatee'd Pimber, who had kept silent, scoffed: "He's mad. Did you see him, he's totally lost it. Why bother with him. Go in peace, dear soul."

The woman drew a brown veil over her angry face: "Pimber, it's no laughing matter. He's evil. We can't just let him be."

"What do you suggest?"

"He fears us, he'll go on the offensive. He's a rogue, a barbarian."

Delvil laughed, took up a boxer's stance: "He won't do anything foolish, it would only help us. This country is quiet because we are the rain that waters it and does it good. We are peaceful, benign. If the Consul wants it otherwise, he can have it. We can make thunder. I've no doubt we can bring him over."

Senators gathered silently next morning in Marduk's office. The Consul, behind bodyguards, waved his arms: "They mean to be rid of us. They'll wage war, openly and covertly. They want us in their new Communal League. I advise anyone who has doubts to leave the country. The lukewarm are cautioned to stay behind."

He allowed rumours to spread about the intentions of the continental rulers. People came streaming to the Council House. Green banners emblazoned with golden heads of grain led the parade. The song "A Peaceful People" rang solemnly through the warm air, rattled windows, echoed through halls, vaulted spaces. Marduk withdrew from the din, before his eyes images of the three envoys, backed by the power of half the globe .

The crowd outside grew denser. Total silence. Then a sudden roar, a shiver, stretching arms. Marduk hatless at the courtyard portal. Beads of sweat on his nose. His face pale. He seemed exhausted, his voice was unclear. From now on the Council House would be open to all; it would no longer be defended. His hand went to his head as if expecting a hat-brim; it stayed there touching his hair.

"I shall go with them," the grey man muttered, "their cause is also mine." It screamed through him. He felt faint, but he was the one screaming. He saw Delvil: "He is my enemy. I devote myself to these clamouring here." As the singing started up again he climbed alone to the fifth floor of the tower. He looked down at the crowd, bright flags: "Power to you, Marduk! Marduk, your life! Are you going to jump?"

No one noticed his confusion, his despair as he inspected facilities and defence posts across the country, spoke almost daily with the Senate. Sometimes a terrible revulsion rose in him: against the Council House pyramid of skulls Senate people; disgust at himself and all the world.

He forced it down. Then he radiated strength to everyone around. [20]

TO THE RUSSIAN PLAIN

SCATTERED bands of people moved across the face of the continent. An obscure desire drove many east out of the overfilled townzones to the devastated Russian plain. On the monstrous battleground of fires poisons rivers they clambered over rubble-heaps, skirted scummy green swamps, picked bone-scraps human and animal.

The wide plain no longer exhaled gas. For long years, rain wind snow sun had done their work. They rode and trudged across an enormous dispersed grassy cemetery. Barley and rye grew wild in clumps. Seeds and spores, dozing dormant beings, had preceded people and animals into the vast maimed waterlogged region where the Volga the Don the Dnieper had decanted their streams. Mushrooms, short-stemmed puffballs and earthstars, had opened in the southern estuaries, by lakes and swamps; autumn storms had carried their airy bodies to the wasted northern lands, strewn spore-dust onto torn bare soil. Southern pines and larches had sent their winged seeds. Grasses had danced silently like windsocks with wings, woolly fuzz, hairy tufts, down from the overgrown slopes of the Urals, from the Crimea and Astrakhan, from Poland Galicia, wafted by the air onto churned-up scrunched-up Russian land, rising and falling with warmth and cold, swirling sliding across the ground. Flew with tiny spinning blades platelets cylinders screws, were dust grains, blew high over endless plains on umbrellas and sails. They came down; flowers grasses stalks germinated in the breathing soil.

From green borderlands, plants flowers trees penetrated ever deeper into the dead interior. The chemicals of the dreadful flame-mines had not shaken the Earth to its core. The age-old Earth lay there, breathed received. The mobile mines had not reached to the sun; every day it rose over the Urals, warmed and gilded the clouds. The moon, often red, often deep yellow, white as a floodlit mirror, rode across the sky behind the sun in the immeasurable twinkling black-blue of the starry heavens. It was all still there. Jagged fissures torn by the mineworks in the ground smoothed over, collapsed. Fumes evaporated. Ever more flecks of colour crept along riverbanks.

When groups of puny humanity from Greece and Romania came in carts with their children and livestock, seeking, bumping over rough broken terrain, they came upon people they had never seen before. Beings who moved like them, pulled a plough, tended horses and cattle, dogs at their side, men and women with broad yellow faces. Curious stares,

but the groups left each other alone. Such encounters were frequent: Chinese Buryaks Mongols had migrated through the Urals passes. Greeks and Romanians settled among them on the land.

ZIMBO

ON THE North Sea coast, the huge townzone of Hamburg had spread to encompass Lübeck and Itzehoe in the north, Bremen in the south. In league with London it tolerated no upheavals, the power of its ruling clans only made stronger by various revolts. The great coastal city shuddered at the advance of the Marchers. The torpid masses demanded walls to east and south, the approaching hostile forces should be attacked without delay and hurled back. London could see the danger for Hamburg, but the English senatorial class rather liked the new breed of people.

In vain did London send envoys to Marduk, the Senate, leaders of the various war-bands. The British centre wanted to avert an attack by Hamburg on the Marchers. Then the notion arose to exploit the war-bands and renegades in Marcher territory; material was sneaked in from abroad, Meki-factories were encouraged by foreign senates to maintain supplies. Renegades, members of dispossessed ruling clans, quickly began to arm themselves. As Marduk, against all expectation, consolidated his power and mobilised amazing popular energy, renegades mingled with the war-bands. They formed companies of their own, little noticed in the general disorder.

Planes landed near the quarters of the renegade war-band leader Lorenz, not far from Hannover. Englishmen sought him out. With them was a being of giant stature, Negroid appearance, dark brown skin. While the pale English under their leader Ten Kates strolled among conifers in discussion with Lorenz, sat at midday by a lake to enjoy, under persuasion, a barbaric lunch – tough shank of a wild boar they had shot – the black man, who was not drawn into the discussion, wandered unobtrusively about the camp, sat legs tucked under him, eyes half closed on the sandy shore, seemed interested only in accepting one of the bright heavy field-rugs the English were spreading. With grateful smiles they accepted the crude copper bowls and pestles handed them when it became clear their enfeebled jaws and broken blackened tooth-stumps could not cope with boiled muscle fibre. They chopped and pounded it to a pulp they could swallow. The eyes of the watching Marchers blazed: they chewed gnawed smacked their lips, crunched bones. The black man, who could chew like the Marchers, still did not join the conversation when at sunset Ten Kates stood up, circulated among the others, and with a hand on slender Lorenz's shoulders pointed him out: That's Zimbo; we'll leave him here, he'll be a great help.

Like a crocodile floating silently on the limpid water's surface, warming itself in the sun, content to be rolled over and over by the current, looking even close up just like a green-brown tree trunk, or drying on a sandbank like a grey rough lump of rock – just so did Zimbo slip inconspicuously among them.

That evening after the English had left, he withdrew. Next morning he knocked at Lorenz's hut, sat clumsily on the chair they offered him. Placed an arm on the table, asked what they used for shooting here. The arm was bleeding. Lorenz bent over the table; the black man had come upon a sentry post that used buckshot. The flatnosed man murmured: "It hurts," let them bandage the wound. In a deep bass voice that gurgled and trickled he asked: What are you up to here. He showed the whites of his eyes. He laughed and nodded when Lorenz explained they were pretending to prepare for an attack, were spying meanwhile to make sure not too much was damaged in the new regions. They tossed down brandy.

What was Consul Marduk doing; where was he; was there still a Senate.

The alert white man closed the door: Marduk's position is not strong, he's not to be trusted, he seems phlegmatic but is dangerous.

Zimbo growled again, showed the bloodshot whites of his eyes. Lorenz urged swift support from England. Zimbo just looked at him through puffy eyelids, slipped out flashing strong yellow teeth.

For a whole week the renegade company, who really thought their moment had come, heard nothing from the English agent. Then they learned he had been strolling around the old urban centre, had even approached Marduk, visited the coal mines at Lausitz. Lorenz had already given up on Zimbo when he turned up in worker's clothing, straight from the Bremen-Celle road where the outermost Marcher posts had been set up. Still he did nothing but lounge around.

Hamburg began its advance. A dull September. After losing Luneburg Heath the Hamburg Senate reconstituted itself, and was now responsive to a population roused by atrocity stories to terror of the eastern foe. Hamburg thought it would make short work of the easterners. Concealed from friendly English and continental observers, a handful of technical troops were despatched, armed with assault weapons similar to the flamethrower masts of an earlier age, though downsized for mobility and with a shorter reach. The troops left Bremen, and in a few days radically cleansed the areas they swept through. They advanced to no great depth and on a short front, thinking to achieve their wider goal through terror. But the troops, seeing the dreadful impact of their pared-down incinerating devices, could not be restrained.

In Hamburg, the Senate wrestled for a second day with the question of prolonged war and how to wage it. The

technical troops now connected their devices to the great trunk cables, fixed transformers shields concentrators onto rotating wheelbases, headed northeast onto the Heath. Roaming Marcher bands in the north were wiped out, those in the rear withdrew along the Aller and towards Hannover. The edge of the Heath was retaken from the eastern foe. The Hamburg townzone was all a-quiver. The rulers turned bellicose: the Marchers must be annihilated. Marcher bands retreated from Hannover Hildesheim Brunswick.

The Meki synthetic food factories had to work overtime to supply the great numbers of men and women under arms. These accepted with distaste the soft fattening stuff from which they had half-weaned themselves. The Senate gave notice of its concern that the war had taken people from their fields and coalmines, but expressed confidence that they would overcome this adversity.

As they retreated to Hannover and further east, the renegades thought the time ripe to strike. They were well-placed to bring immediate famine to the country. And so they did. The fifteen hundred people who, three weeks after the Hamburg counter-attack, walked out of the synthetic food factories and surrendered to troops declared that their enthusiasm for war had made them unwelcome in the factories. They hoped to gain time and save their lives; given the shortage of supplies, catastrophe could not be far behind. They were paraded individually before the astonished Berlin Senate, who half-suspected a trick. At first the troops were jubilant; then came the Senate's warning note.

Suddenly Marduk himself was on the scene again, as if he had only been awaiting the signal. His old enemies, men and women of the devices, of high knowledge, meant to strangle the country, destroy his works. His reputation – and his bodyguard – at once secured him the leadership of the Senate. He interrogated the prisoners, accused them of supporting the renegades; what were they plotting. He had all fifteen hundred fugitives from the factories herded together at Linden near Hannover. In the presence of delegates from every war-band, he had a hundred cruelly flogged in an autumnal meadow. It took all afternoon.

When next morning and afternoon they still denied the charge, he handed them over to the troops to kill at will. News of these killings never reached abroad, trickled through only to Hamburg. Warriors male and female drank from skulls, that day and the next. Among nearby war-bands the growing lust for war was accompanied by lascivious urges that weakened them and enabled Marduk to apply other methods to the surviving prisoners. The grey weary Consul seemed rejuvenated. He had the prisoners shackled. Food must be made to last, fighters should where feasible return to the fields. He let the war-bands and their chiefs know where matters stood, and made their duty clear: wherever hunger set in, they must find their own food. The main part of his armed bodyguard went to the frontier.

Not only fugitives from the Meki-factories were shackled and killed by Marduk. Not far from Lorenz's company, at Uelzen on the Ilmenau, was the renegade band of Jan Lubbock, and north of him the mainly female band of Angela Castel, a quiet hard woman. [21] Small brown shaven-headed Castel was the only woman among the leaders of the now strongly male Marcher zone. She and her following of embittered women wore fir-sprigs as their symbol. They were mocked, but allowed to go on. She proudly kept fugitives from the Meki-factories at her side. When movements of bands to the south and east made clear that the hated Marduk was planning something against her, she broke out. She made space for herself by an attack to the north on Hamburg territory, near Lauenburg on the Elbe. For the first time she employed her own long-distance weapons: first the cloud-blowers. These were gasifiers that emitted an airmass heavy and black, as if saturated with carbon. Even in a breeze it hardly stirred from the ground or deviated from the targeted direction. It was not toxic, but the black billowing ground-hugging cloud completely hid every person object cart tree hill road horse, so that everything in its range must at once, filled with dread, come to a complete stop,. The blackness was so thick that people could not see each other even when touching, stood helpless as their eyes strained into the dark.

What a disaster for her opponents when the first cloud, which they assumed to be toxic, swelled near in impenetrable billows to engulf them. Trucks tried to escape, with shrill muffled warning cries. Dashing through the blackness they ran into people running standing dithering, hit trees houses, crashed smashed. Horses in the meadows broke free, galloped, whinnied frantically, knocked people over, fell down steps, in their panic bit at other animals, people, trees that stood in their way. People wherever they were, in buildings, on the street, in fields tried to escape, ran shouting, clutched at each other, saw nothing, felt blindly on. Then horses and trucks came among them. They fell over. If they found a hole they crawled into it. They listened all around for sounds, to work out where they could run to. And as they sat quietly, mesmerised by the dark, they were caught by enemy troops, shaken like sand in a sieve, riddled with holes by bullets and buckshot from above and all sides. Lightning was sent coursing through them. For one burning deadly moment there was light all around.

Outside Lauenburg, Castel diverted a river onto a densely populated district occupied by troops. The waters of the wide flowing Elbe in its deep-laid bed rose as if skimmed to flood over the leafy stone-lined bank, sputtered and sprayed as if resisting, then with more force surged roared in a mighty wave into a landscape of meadows parks streets. It rolled spread south onto open heath. The torrent flooded into buildings through windows, carried off people furniture animals fences. It demolished gardens stables factories, swelled ever higher, driven by the alternately silent and hurricane-howling force directed at the river's bed. The Elbe was severed to half its depth by spurting gasifying chains plunged into the water from rigid overhead cables. Beneath this barrier it flowed smoothly. Above the barrier it rose wall-high as if from a sluice; the sluggish muddy Elbe sloshed across the land.

Castel set up a defensive line of long-distance weapons around the troops who had reached the Elbe, waited to see what effect her actions would have on Marduk. While Jan Lubbock and Lorenz, fleeing in dismay towards Uelzen, tried to locate Zimbo to report on Castel's actions, the black narrow-skulled man turned up at Lauenburg, asked Castel, who

had met him once, about her intentions. She replied tartly that she would do whatever she could. He wanted to join her, conduct further operations. She declined, her face impassive. Zimbo was angry for a moment, then beat his chest, took her clenched fist in his; she smiled, and he wished her luck. As Castel dug in around Lauenburg, Zimbo made sure that Lorenz and Lubbock could not link up with this dangerous woman. They did what the cunning man from the Congo told them. Delivered seventy fugitives from the Meki-factories to Marduk in Berlin to add to his collection, concealed their weapons, presented submissive faces to the grey man and the Senate. Marduk took to deploying the same means he had used at the start of his consulate. The bodyguard at the Council House and around his person was strengthened by hundreds. Black silent Lucio Angelelli resumed his old post.

Marduk flew with Angelelli over the extensive territories annexed by his zone. They saw the advancing flamethrowers on Luneburg Heath, flames in Celle, the surging floods around treacherous Angela Castel's base; scattered undisciplined bands plundering; farmers defending themselves from neighbours. Alarming news reached them in Hannover: the outlaw Castel was preparing an assault on Berlin, with support from Hamburg and England. A female envoy of hers came to Hannover to find Marduk; in a curt letter Castel advised the Consul to lay down his arms and flee abroad; she was not his only foe in Marcher territory. Marduk knew this. It was not the point. He, and still more his silent black companion Angelelli, had been moved by the sight of the snow-covered land, the terrain already opened by the plough, people digging wells, the collapsed houses and factories, and to the west,beyond the burgeoning land, the giant townzones, flames on the Heath, the Lauenburg flood. It came like a bolt from the blue: sorrow and joy – his work!

"Angelelli, you know Castel. The woman's bluffing. All she can hang over us is her wretched matriarchy. She doesn't give a fig for the country. She understands nothing. Even less than the London people, who at least have some clue. But if she means to expose herself to destruction for nothing, for her stupid plans, at the hands of me or others, I won't be found wanting. Will you be found wanting, Angelelli."

"Not I, Marduk." He lifted his proud head.

Some of the bodyguard had followed Marduk to Hannover. As he was posting them on the outskirts of town, Jonathan's arrival was reported. In a room with a smoky coal fire in a half-burnt factory, Marduk gazed placidly as the pale soft man said: "I've been looking for you for three days. I'm glad I found you."

"I too, Jonathan."

"You'll ask me what I want."

"No I won't. It's you who've come to me."

"I want nothing from you, Marduk. I never have. I come to warn you."

"Castel's messenger has already been here."

A whisper from the pale man: "Sounds likely. You don't seem concerned. You must leave, go abroad."

"Are you a renegade?"

The younger man shivered, collected himself, stood tall: "Yes." Marduk's hands hung slack. His eyes closed. He seemed asleep. When he opened his eyes, Jonathan was still there. This man, once his only joy, had stepped closer: "I know you're not afraid of me. I'm warning you: go abroad."

"You think so little of me? Are we strangers?" Marduk sighed wearily. "A renegade. No point wasting words on him. Castel, insolent woman. His name I shall not utter."

"Marduk, I don't hate you."

"You sit by your devices, oppose me? Makes you feel good? Farewell, Jonathan. I wish you all the best."

"I didn't come for this. Heed my warning, Marduk! We are many."

Marduk grimly: "Leave me be. I can't stand the sight of you. Go! You dare come here, why? Not to save my life." [22]

"You killed my mother, Marduk. I followed you, then I had to go away. Now I'm warning you. Don't be angry."

"Did you come here to talk of your mother? Your wretched hopelessness is entirely wrapped up in that. Better you'd never mentioned your mother. I know she brought us together. Now – she's not on your side!"

Jonathan groaned: "Stop, Marduk."

"Why won't you release me? Why won't you go?"

"It wasn't easy for me to come here. I've suffered endlessly for you and because of you, Marduk. You know it. I can't let go. I'm warning you: don't die, and don't die with my help. I beg you, run away. Please, please, Marduk."

Marduk turned away. Lucio Angelelli entered the room. At a glance from Marduk the captain seized Jonathan around the waist, dragged him howling whimpering to the door, flung him down the steps. A guard leapt forward and knocked him out with his baton. Marduk from the doorway waved the guard back.

Again the Consul was entranced by the snowy fields as he patrolled the guard posts. Snow, endlessly blowing, blanketed ruined buildings, hung like birds' nests over edges and abutments of walls, sculpted itself into balconies, flowed down steps, spread a wide light cloth over wall-stumps steps the ground. Flakes tumbled from a grey sky, sprinkled trees houses roads. The sight calmed Marduk as he strode in a long leather coat beside the captain.

"The question is, Angelelli, would we rather be cowards and wait for our time to come, or should we resist. I don't expect an answer. I've no desire to wait for anything. I have arrived."

"They'll have to rip the land from our teeth."

Angelelli arranged a ceremony for the troops, on the lines of a traditional Indian Medicine Dance, imported from England. He selected the thirty strongest men; they had to run circuits around and over a nearby hill until they collapsed

from exhaustion. The men went two days and two nights without food or drink; the main body of troops was camped along the route, now silent, now singing. The leaders had prescribed two days and two nights. Not one of the thirty men who at the end dragged themselves on feet they could hardly lift, eyes staring, heads drooping, lurching across the white landscape, themselves snow-covered – not one had dropped out by the time the final bugle call blared, the roar of human voices lifted in song along the way.

Black Zimbo stood unremarked at the side. He slipped off on the last day, brooding, whistled to himself. He kicked stones. What a fine spectacle. He'd seen something like it at Yellala Falls on the Congo. He laughed and hummed contentedly. He grabbed a young birch tree in both arms, tugged it back and forth. Those men had good muscles. And lungs. How they lurched, as if someone had kicked them in the backside. It had worked; they'd managed it. Why would anyone do anything to them. He tugged and twisted at the birch. He couldn't care less about Mister Delvil and the Brussels lot. All those fat people in their towns, fatheads. Their heads waggle, they're like pumpkins; must be careful when they walk, or they fall down. He giggled: if a storm comes, hats and heads will fly off together. They should put a hook in the head, and a chain, so they don't lose it. He made the birch whip to and fro. Why should he exert himself for these popeyed pumpkin creatures. He liked the runners; with people like that you could run rings around the others.

He strolled into the evening, rubbed his hands, looked back at the slender young birch, still swaying, threw stones at it. Marduk is no more than that. He roared with pleasure, threw a whole handful of stones. What a stupid weak-willed fellow, he deserves to go. It won't be hard. More handfuls against the tree.

ANGELA CASTEL

MARDUK'S end began with an assault by the untamed Castel. She openly flew the renegade flag, the hated western symbol of a flaming Earth. She swept swiftly through half-empty country, infested with robbers refugees the starving, southeast of Lauenburg. To her rear was Uelzen, where Lubbock and Lorenz had assembled their intact companies. She had flamethrowers, taken from Hamburg troops. No letters or messengers sped between her and the other two previously friendly renegade captains. Everywhere she moved in the snowy landscape she deployed the tactic of black kettling: smothering any threatening district in clouds, then gassing or incinerating. Along the way two thousand of her troops destroyed metal bulls, symbols of Marke's revolution, the bellowing bronze beings with the blade in their flank erected by the blind Consul. Male and female commandos scornfully surrounded the columns, waited for the dreadful long drawn out repetitive lamenting bellow. In mid-cry, the most horrible dying sound, a grenade blasted the giant rigid body, sent column and shreds of metal flying, to the horror of the locals who came running up. The destruction of the sacred bulls fanned mute fury among the people. The troops scattered their fir-sprig insignia over metal fragments. If they had not moved on so fast, an hour later they would have seen fires blazing at the site of the explosion; branches piled high by the mourning populace over the enemy's green fir-sprigs were set on fire, once all the fragments of metal and stone had been solemnly gathered and buried.

Confident little Angela Castell was disconcerted when people she thought she knew slipped sullenly away as her company advanced. Fine words carried by her advance scouts – liberation, communion with western peoples – bore no fruit. She experienced the same astonishment that the old ruling clans had felt after Marke's death, when Marduk burst in on them: the masses' deep twitching aversion to the devices, their dogged adherence to Marke's policies and path. The locals were powerless to attack Castel's troops directly, but by misdirection along country lanes and widespread ad hoc trickery gained some breathing space. The largely male masses veered between mockery of Castel's arrogant band of women, and outbreaks of bitterness. Matriarchal rule was still a vivid memory, riling the blood of men impelled to follow the plough. Castel's troops as they pushed forward were surrounded by bloodhounds. The Marchers spied on them, awaiting human plunder.

The wives and daughters of these men were the most savage in their hatred of Castel's women. They were bloodthirsty, seized stragglers and strays, beat them, humiliated them, locked them in cowsheds. [23]

Castel was unruffled. At Stendal she was on the periphery of the Berlin townzone. She was watched from two sides: by Marduk from his base near Hannover while his captain commanded half the bodyguard in the old city; and by black narrow-skulled Zimbo. When Marduk's captain pulled out of Magdeburg aiming for Castel, Zimbo appeared unexpectedly with the Lorenz band, flanking the woman's troops as they swarmed out from Stendal on a broad front. She at once called a halt. Once again Zimbo openly demanded leadership of the whole action, as representative of the Communal League. Then he had a conversation with the sturdy brown woman, while at the same time his forces spread out, forcing the other side to extend its line. As confident Castel negotiated with Zimbo, fir-sprig in her hand, her fate was sealed.

Suddenly, as they marched and rode through knee-deep snow, Castel's company saw everything around them retreating, bending away. They were engulfed in an element like water, like those caught in Castel's black smoke they had no way to find their bearings. When anyone – an individual, groups trudging behind or alongside the mobile devices

– went to pick up a handful of snow, the hand that stretched towards the soft cold malleable snow was unable to reach it. The hand looked enormous, and far away. They pulled it back; huge, slow, covering half the horizon it crept nearer. Something dark curled towards the people alongside the devices, which had grown sky-high. They felt for the steps up to the platform; these seemed half a house high. Giant hands gripped one step at a time, they placed a foot gingerly, ever more nervously, made their way up and there the devices loomed, huge as a cathedral. Down on the ground they stumbled along; the earth seemed to flinch away beneath the feet; the head soared huge high in the air; another black giant head swayed towards them. They moaned in mortal terror, rubbed and kneaded their seemingly swollen arms, head, thought they should prod and squeeze themselves back to normal. They stood like those caught in Castel's black clouds, flailed about with eyes tight shut. They called to one another, could hear others very close by, but dared not look. And as they stood or lay, tried aghast to look and take a step, always down into an abyss, up a mountainous crag, over houses, Zimbo's men, shielded from the disorienting light rays, came running among them, shoved them aside like fat sheep, took the wagons and devices as women clung to them roaring begging for mercy.

The conference between Angela Castel and the leaders of the other renegade companies that had turned against her lasted three long hours. Then, without a word, lanky serious Lorenz and a small number of his men entered Castel's tent. She stood, waved the men away. Lorenz in the doorway nodded silently to Zimbo. The Negro, in a loose fur jacket, went up to the frowning imperious woman, as she shrank back took from her hand the fir-sprig, which he placed with a tender gesture under his jacket, gurgled laughter. She tried to reach the entrance to join the other women. Zimbo made way for her. Castel was still berating her guards, who seemed turned to stone, for not seizing the strangers, when Zimbo appeared beside her in the white landscape. An endless line of men was trudging past, pushing and carrying her equipment, hers. A small group of women was led past; they seemed dispirited, hands tied behind them. [24] Angela Castel, terribly pale, hid her face in her hands. She said through gritted teeth: "You are a despicable cheat."

Zimbo: "What's your point."

"Will you tie me up."

"I don't know yet. Probably I'll be forced to." She lowered her hands: "Then I beg you to kill me quickly."

"That might happen."

"I'll do it myself."

He shook his head: "Think, Angela Castel, whether it would be good for me. How could I show Marduk my loyal devotion. I could do no better than send you to him." She stared, faint with rage.

"Better come into your tent, Angela Castel. My people will see us. They might pay you an unwelcome compliment. Tie her up, Lorenz. Stay calm, Angela. Marduk will be most grateful for my little gift."

Zimbo at once informed Angelelli, on his return from Magdeburg, that he had disarmed Castel's insurgent band and taken her prisoner. He sent Castel and three of her officers with only a small escort to Marduk in Hannover. In an accompanying letter he declared he would place at Marduk's disposal the powerful weapons he had taken by trickery from the insurgents. He shivered with pleasure as the transport with Castel departed. [25] [26]

END OF THE WOMEN

WAR-BANDS in their camps gave free rein to barbaric customs. They forced themselves to go hungry and half-naked in the cold, perform the toughest toil in the fields. Torture games leading to the death of the tortured were rampant. Running barefoot over sharp gravel came into vogue. Then sudden assaults by night on some sleeping victim. No one came to the screaming victim's aid; he had to assert himself to the point of death. The victim usually died.

There were groups each with its own insignia among the bands, but nowhere any despotic obedience. Those who came through the sieve held a kind of council assembly, conducted in grim earnest, where newcomers were reported, their induction decided. The so-called "marking" of the newcomers was performed in front of these gatherings. Various procedures were used: insignia branded on the chest; one or both little toes smashed; teeth knocked out. Sometimes the procedures were carried out in seclusion, more often before the silent council assembly, in designated spaces in the camp, in former still-sumptuous pleasure-palaces. Such customs had become common since the changes in the Marcher zone following the Urals War.

"Prolonged baptism" was a procedure many new mothers practised on their newborn: holding the infant under water until a given signal. Many were sacrificed: this "baptism" was a way to dispose of excess or unwanted children, especially females. They indulged in "booby games", extremely risky games in which prisoners were given access to not very effective close-range devices. The devices were handed to the surprised prisoners, who were allowed to turn the jail into a fortress. But they soon found what the plan was: retrieval of the devices at night by men who sneaked in – for the prisoners were supposed to guard the jail themselves; no one thought to escape with so many strong cunning people nearby and long-range devices in the area – fog-throwers cloud-makers mesmerisers incinerators. Suddenly someone

would be there, act like a casual visitor, perhaps strike up a treacherous friendship. Then he would utter the shrill war-cry, fling himself on the looted harmless-looking crate with its levers knobs buttons sliders, lightning would flash through the room. Now and then battles raged in the bigger jails. The assailants had to save themselves by jumping from windows, and paid for their daring with their lives. No one came to their aid.

To such a jail in an area controlled by a war-band near Linden, Angela Castel was brought with her women and some other renegades. She thought Marduk would question her, had a faint hope he would use her against Zimbo. But he did not come. Her women were dragged before gatherings of the war-band, used shamefully; suicides occurred. Then the sudden inexplicable assaults started, the provisioning of jails with close-range devices. The prisoners were warned: you are responsible for your lives; no one will help you out of danger. It became clear: the war-bands were in a state of war with the prisoners. Abuses of women declined; they were being kept for battle. So Castel began to prepare her women for a fight. Within two weeks her jail was considered unassailable. She knew that she was in range of long-distance devices; also that this need not concern her. The women were on highest alert; rumours of the jail had spread to distant groups. Assaults in strength were organised; many men were killed. The only weapons the men were allowed were cunning and unarmed strength.

Then Marduk turned up late one afternoon as a thaw was setting in, with his bodyguard in the square outside the jail; he summoned men and women out to him. He asked after Castel. While they were calling her he went through the crowd, studied the people standing with slack arms, bowing greetings to him. Pale women, weak and strong; savage southern faces, fine pale features of people from the ruling clans, haughty coldly challenging soft faces, eyes that refused to acknowledge him. He knew them: they had been hounded out of the secret research centres. The western advance, the war, their hopes had flushed them out more effectively than his long decades of surveillance. They could not cast off their arrogance; it was their right to stand here.

A captain accompanied Marduk through the crowd, which quickly opened up, gave him plenty of space. The looks they gave one another, sudden jerks of the shoulder, revealed their fear of a surprise assault. But Marduk went on through the crowd, to where Castel awaited him.

As Castel, small, with a stern grim expression planted herself before him, Marduk shrugged his fur-clad shoulders: “What do you want?”

“You asked for me. I’m Angela Castel.” Marduk, caught by a gust of wind, turned, coughed, pulled her aside a few paces. [27] “I hear you give a good account of yourselves in a fight. I advise you not to carry it too far.” [28] Castel realised Marduk had nothing for her. [29]

A war-band had settled by Linden; its young men set themselves the goal of clearing the women’s jail. There was no more trickery. Doors and windows were barricaded with the last remaining devices; the women, whipped on by their hatred, crouched below the sills. [30] For days they noticed constant movement among the war-band, its cause unknown. New troops marched through the town. Devices and long-distance weapons, small detachments of riders came past. The band controlling the area of the jail burned down buildings in their rear, prepared for retreat. Their youngest members made one more assault on the jail, before a passing band could smother or incinerate it with one of their weapons. Mad drunk, they infiltrated at nightfall, having first set up a long rope in the square. To this they tied the panicked desperately flailing overpowered women one by one by the hair. [31] Men stood baffled when no more foes could be found and the last handful of women were dragged out to the rope. Men raged, foamed, smashed whatever they found, beds devices, jumped from windows, set fire to doors, window frames. The prisoners were lit up by the blazing fires, flying sparks. Castel already dying, belly ripped open, lay in the dirt. The rope was attached to two teams of six horses. Dark night in the ruins of Linden. A troop of warriors armed with whips mounted up as the jubilant band set off to take their prisoners to Marduk. Hup! Gee-up! Now slow, now galloping, along streets, over tree roots.

MARDUK FLEES

MARDUK saw the gravity of the situation. He observed Zimbo’s enigmatic stance, this man whom England had placed in his country, who was exploiting the enemy forces in the Marcher zone. And for the first time in his long consulate he had the feeling: the work Marke and he had done was good, must not be destroyed. A sense of well-being surged in the strong man: the land was pleasing to him. Evil detritus from his past: Jonathan, once in a dark impenetrable time his friend – let no one touch on that – had come to him, spat on him. Set a gravestone over it. [32]

At a moment when none were expecting it, the Consul of the powerful Marcher zone initiated negotiations with London. His envoys flew to Frankfurt Bordeaux London to report his willingness for an armistice. He would halt his advance, the other side should cease hostilities. A receptive almost joyful reply reached him. Zimbo, Marduk learned from London, was not entirely under the new Communal League’s control. When Marduk informed the leaders of the war-bands of his negotiations, they were stunned, raised objections. He coldly declared that he still had his bodyguard,

and his invincible devices. Senate and war-band leaders remembered this.

Defying his orders, they spread word of his negotiations with the westerners. They also disclosed what he had said to them. Now secret discussions took place among the surprised war-bands; these soon came to the Consul's attention. The staging of war-games increased noticeably. Then a loose migration from the western regions, a growing spontaneous withdrawal from Hannover territory amid unease, a panicked eastward stream. No sooner had Marduk become aware of the first movements eastward of war-bands and small groups than a flood like a springtime thaw was already pouring in towards Berlin from the Hamburg border. Everything was on the move towards the centre, burning buildings behind them, breaking up the roads.

A warning came from Angelelli at the start of this activity. He advised Marduk to make certain of his bodyguard. Then communication with Angelelli was cut. The war-bands must have seized heavy weapons. Marduk tried to fly to Berlin with some of his loyal guard. Forward scouts came against a ray-barrier; might take days to deal with it.

When Marduk alighted from his plane near Hannover onto cold wet earth, a small unknown group of riders stopped by his base, leading several spare mounts. Angelelli, his black captain, was seated on a muddy horse, its flanks heaving. He jumped down, followed Marduk into the house. In unusual agitation he pleaded with Marduk to flee: a large proportion of the long-distance weapons were no longer at Marduk's disposal; Marduk's weapons and his guards, all those not in his immediate vicinity, were lost; his personal bodyguard not to be trusted. The Negro Zimbo, Castel's vanquisher – he had seen her mutilated body – was himself leading a band of renegades; he had proof. Zimbo showed two faces: towards his fighters he was a renegade like themselves; towards others, a friend of Marduk. War-bands were streaming to join him as he trumpeted Marduk's treachery, panicked bands drawing around him. Marduk must flee. Horses outside. He, Angelelli, is fleeing.

Marduk flung his heavy leather coat onto the floor of the bare evening-lit room. He even removed the leather cap with the bull-sign that was the badge of a Consul, threw it from him. Slowly he unbuttoned his jacket. He breathed out the fire in his chest. Jonathan too had said he must flee. He stared hard at the blackhaired captain: where should he flee to, and why.

Very softly, shrugging: All we do is save ourselves; we must go to London. [33]

Hooves clattered outside. A groom gave him a heavy chestnut. Marduk jogged past burned blown-up houses. North of the town, on a field where the band had halted, he stopped.

Bright white moonlight pouring down. Marduk walked groaning beside his mount. Should he have become a renegade, was Jonathan right? Were the renegades winning, England and America winning? He dug his hand into crumbly damp soil, put it to his lips, licked. Horse at his side, together. He was not lost. *He* was not lost: he ground his teeth. He pressed his head against the horse. All these newly conquered things, land animal moonlight, had been left intact by the fighters. They were rushing into Zimbo's net, that cunning renegade. The crazy devices had to go. All of them. Marduk swung into the saddle and whistled. The crazy devices had to go. For good.

Angelelli stayed one more day, searched for the Consul. That evening he fled west, convinced that Zimbo had abducted Marduk with help from his own bodyguard.

ZIMBO VICTORIOUS

THE WAR-BANDS pushed on to Wittenberg Stendal Magdeburg. Zimbo's agents met them on roads leading from the Elbe: Consul Marduk plans to betray the townzone and the Marcher cause; Angelelli is a fugitive; Zimbo will defend the country.

The war-bands, mistrustful, halted on the left bank of the Elbe. Zimbo in his camp struggled with the growing almost uncontrollable excitement of his fighters. They were angered by the outrageous treatment Castel had received at Marduk's hands; Zimbo had delivered her to him; they demanded that Zimbo make full use of his mandate from England, stop sitting on the fence. Zimbo sent messengers, then appeared in person at a leaders' conference near Wittenberg. The leaders had become cocky since Marduk's heavy weapons, the most dangerous on the whole continent, fell into their hands. Before they would collaborate they demanded proof that he would not betray them, would put himself under their authority. He flew back, his thoughts gloomy, prepared to give his troops their head and launch a swift attack.

Then dreadful events occurred in his own camp and nearer to Berlin. A diabolical clique of traitors, it seemed, wanted the total collapse of the whole zone. Most Meki-factories, the derelict as well as those brought back into operation, were blown up, incinerated by artificial lightning. Puzzling attacks occurred on devices inside the camp, in some cases destroying crucial components. And these disasters affected both Zimbo and the war-bands across the Elbe. It must be Marduk loyalists, remnants of his guard; Zimbo feared at moments it was the work of a new reliable agent of the Communal League. He warned the leaders: the Communal League means to tame you, better pull together soon; meanwhile we're hunting down the trouble-makers.

But Marduk himself along with two dozen loyal followers was responsible for it all. They had devices mirror-cloaks dazzlers. Marduk was fighting for his cause. He trusted the mood of his war-bands. England would do nothing, they would survive the crisis. He fought with a fury that appalled even himself. Memories of Targuniash and Zuklati, the Maccabaean machine-breakers of centuries ago, awoke in him. He spoke their names. Now he knew them. This was where he stood. Scales had fallen from his eyes. His rule as Consul had been a tool, a hand-plane struggling stubbornly to smooth a knotty plank. It was all good. He had suffered, had not known the good he was doing. Always in his thoughts were those who had thrown themselves into machines to reach oblivion.

Hard, sure and swift his movements. Severe frost. Marduk and his people slipped between the mutually watchful lines of Marcher forces and Zimbo's troops, returning every time to Hannover and his base. Every settlement was deserted, few people still lived in these parts, the landscape was reverting to its age-old reverie.

Two weeks after Angelelli's flight and the loss of his guard, he rode for the first time on moorland south of Grinderwald forest. Ten days later he came a second time. News of his presence had spread across the desolate moor, around his old base area. His men came looking for reliable recruits, moved quite openly. Marduk himself said they should gather more people, never despair. [34]

The great push in the Helmstedt region that led to the loss of almost all the rogue war-bands' heavy weaponry reduced Marduk's following by about half. [35] Marduk spurred on the returning troops. They must hurry: Zimbo is still much better armed than the war-bands and can bring us to our knees. The last push had yielded few captured weapons, and seriously damaged their mirror-camouflage. It was a desperate move to head straight for Zimbo's strongly-defended camp.

The effort failed. The barely fifty men still with Marduk fought with suicidal courage. As a machine, a locomotive thinks not of its own safety but hurtles along the rails, smashes itself and other trains, so did they hurtle boldly on, often visible in their shattered invisibility masks, slashing and smashing the soft entrails of the devices they came across. Most died under defensive rays against which no mask could help.

Marduk aimed for a device whose location he had deduced from the curious headgear and protective clothing of the men tending it. But not far from this device was another he had failed to spot. Suddenly, as he crept over frozen clay, the tall implacable man felt his legs obstructed, his knees pushed back, feet pressed to the ground. He pushed on, forced himself on, tried to twist his way free using his hips. Then he drew back for a leap: either break through, or retreat. He bounced, then felt a stronger pressure. He lowered his head, forced his knee down. It worked. Face and neck swelled reddened with the effort. Slowly slowly he bent his knee. Slowly slowly, as if about to flap and fly away, his arms came away from his sides. It was like pushing against a rock. He bent the other knee so he could stand steady. His chest was in a vice, his upper body so tightly gripped that his feet came away from the ground as he struggled. He looked down and groaned: both feet a hand's breadth above the frozen ground. A shoe pulled from his foot hung in the air below the white bare foot, twitching toes. Marduk swayed. Slowly he slumped down. But for all his hours of dogged writhing beating bracing he could not bring his body back to earth. Bent forward he seemed forever plunging to the ground he could never reach. His arms, bent limp weary, seemed to lie on cushions, or in a vice. He could not even bend the splayed fingers. And as he girded himself for new effort, excruciating pain forced him to stop. He tried to see his left hand, the source of this burning howling pain. The fingers, he could see, were unnaturally stiff, bent upward over the back of the hand. They were broken, dislocated. He gave a low groan.

He struggled with his eyelids. His corneas were drying, the lids, the lids would not close. Oh to close his eyelids. He kept his body still, struggled only with these little muscles. Millimetre by millimetre he forced them down until only a narrow slit was left. Now, thankfully, he could not see. Thoughts tumbled behind his brow. "They have me. Zimbo has me. I am lost. The criminals have me. It was all in vain." Hot raging nameless sorrow swept over him. Behind the glinting strips of mirror-mask, his blue thick swollen face quivered. The eyeslits filled with tears. The chest, the throat tried to sob. But only a howling gasping came through the clenched teeth. [36] His breathing was laboured. The mirror-camouflage scraped his throat. He tried to tear it off, wanted to flex his already dead fingers, where are they. Tried to call his black captain, Angelelli. His tongue would not move.

He – was laid out in a coffin. [37]

Night fell. The shoe dangled beside the bent leg. Tears that oozed slowly down the camouflaged motionless face froze, froze the eyelids together. Two little trails of ice trickled over the lips into the gaping mouth. Enveloped the tongue. Cloaked the jaws.

Towards morning Zimbo's men checked the device, turned it off. The body of the second Consul dropped with a dull thud onto the misty frozen earth. His cladding burst open. Now Zimbo's men could see a dark shape out on the field. Approaching they saw it was a human body, motionless on hands and knees like some creature. Metal strips dangled from the head. Blood oozed from the open mouth. A black pool under it.

Rumours of Marduk's death were suppressed by Zimbo. When he ascertained that the Marcher bands were now disarmed, he sent a strong contingent of his well-equipped forces against the Marcher camp near Magdeburg. He slipped unnoticed behind them with his own band. As the fighters gathered in a boggy valley below the Marcher leader's base – Zimbo was already among the leaders – he handed his own troops over to the war-bands. He allowed his own trusting followers to be disarmed and taken prisoner. That evening they were herded together to be sent off to Marduk in disgrace. Now Zimbo played his trump card. He revealed Marduk's frozen body. They stood in deep shock as torches illuminated the corpse, the uncannily twisted body on which Zimbo had demonstrated the power of his devices.

Discussions through the night reached no conclusion. They angrily demanded that Zimbo destroy most of his weapons, or hand them over. They hated Zimbo for killing Marduk: it wasn't his business. They spoke little with the black broad-nosed man, who kept to his tent with his company, behind impenetrable defences. He could feel them grinding their teeth. He promised them the weapons, smiled. But it wouldn't be clever to destroy them, given the danger posed by Hannover and Hamburg.

Big assemblies of troops were brought together between Stendal and Wittenberg, and a gathering of leaders at Stendal. Zimbo, infrequently looking around from narrowed eyes, appeared as humble calm smooth as ever. The Marcher leaders were astonished at his cunning and his giant stature. He murmured that he was not looking to subject them, but he wanted to be elected Consul. England had sent him to win the country for the Communal League; he'd changed his mind. He would continue the policies of Marke and Marduk.

Marduk's corpse was embalmed. Zimbo was sworn in beside the frozen body, embalmed in the same crooked pose in which its life had ended : he would continue the post-Urals tradition, work to expand Marcher territory, destroy all Meki-factories as quickly as possible. Mutterings among the war-bands persisted after this oath and the negotiations. Until Zimbo earned legitimacy through two moves: swift brutal suppression of an incursion from Hannover; and on his return, the removal of twenty opponents among the war-band leaders.

Before the end of winter Zimbo entered the Council House in Berlin. He was the third Consul, the first not to have grown up here. Around the time when the sly power-hungry African trod the halls of the Council House and took over the salon with the pyramid of skulls, which he augmented with the bones of dead renegades and war-band leaders, belligerent Marchers moved out from their tight little fields, flooded once more past Stendal Wittenberg into Hannover territory, cleansed Luneburg Heath. Winter not yet over, hordes of settlers who had fled abroad to the security of the Meki-factories followed along behind. Zimbo secured the remaining Meki-factories with men and women who had stayed with him through the campaign, kept them in operation so that large numbers of the discontented who had gone east to throw themselves into agricultural toil could be freed up for military service in the west.

Once again the frontiers of the great seaport Hamburg were under threat. In place of the fanatical but equilibrium-seeking Marduk, now at the centre of the Marcher realm sat a renegade from the Communal League, a power-hungry cunning false brutal man. The great townzones to the south and west of Berlin demanded the annihilation of the Marcher vermin, pacification of the continent. Their huffing was fearful but lame, the feverish ranting of defeated beings.

PART FIVE:
THE EMPTYING OF THE CITIES

THE HOT CONTINENT

UNSTOPPABLE on every populated continent, the post-Urals urge. The struggles among the townzones had been noisy and dangerous; underneath, other powerful desires lay deep and broad. The hot continent of Africa, filled with a volatile mass of people, was the first to twitch. Attacks like those of Berlin on its western neighbours were made from all sides against various power centres.

The huge lands plains mountains groves riverbanks had never been entirely empty. New masses of humanity kept pouring forth; towns emptied their masses into superabundant steppe and jungle; from time to time they returned, dangerous, groaning. The enfeeblement and degeneration of the urban masses never went deep; African coastal centres in the west east south on the Mediterranean were undermined infiltrated by men and women from the wild hinterland.

Breadfruit oil-palms watermelons had never needed rest; now they grew in mad profusion. Vast lands along the Nile yielded lush fields of rice wheat six-row barley. Sorghum grew high from Egypt to the Cape. Storks bitterns parrots herons vultures flew in flocks; leopards and lions roamed, ruddy bush-pig antelope dwelled among bananas. Families of grey-white elephants: they fed on round yellow palm-fruit. Armies of greedy apes squatted in trees. Storms rain heat. Torpid urbanites, enfeebled by hashish opium newer drugs, shuddered before the human beasts who appeared in their midst out of forest and desert. Tried to chase them away, wanted to tame them, took them in; the towns must guard themselves as best they can. Centre after centre was destroyed by these monstrous creatures of the forest, who treated the enfeebled helpless masses satanically.

Some towns quickly surrendered to the strong wily tribes, and just as swiftly the wicked proud creatures tore down and wrecked the trusting town. Hundreds of thousands wandered into the wilderness, experienced a brief time of day night storm heat wild beasts before dying. On the tumultuous hot continent, cities had long emptied into the rampant rich countryside, while on the northern and western continents townzones still lay dull and shabby side by side at each other's throats.

In South and North America, great townzones still roared away filled with the finest luxuries, at the same time were leaky vessels unable to hold their contents. Everywhere senates ruling classes tyrants, struggling or holding on, held the reins, had no idea what to steer for.

EXODUS TO THE YUKON

THE MOUNTAINOUS northwest coast of North America smouldered, around the time when the old continent was tackling the Marcher consuls. During the Urals War, Asiatic hordes poured from the Japanese islands – Kyushu Shikoku Hokkaido Sakhalin Formosa; Mongol and Siberian raiders travelled across the great water. A mere few thousand occupied the former western townzone of Francisco, and further north Portland and the Columbia River; they advanced by swift raids past the Salt Lake to Cheyenne and Denver. Senates, taken by surprise, offered almost no resistance. All the experienced men and women from these towns were trapped between the Urals and the Volga, or flying with the squadrons, sailing with the fleets.

The Japanese, hunting down and exterminating the ruling clans, did not leave America when the war ended. There they sat, not at the bidding of their people but on their own account, scorning the westerners. Tolerated by the populace they looked with lively interest over the curious fabric of these great cities, all new to them. And when the Asiatics, protected by their weapons, had moved for some years among the idle slack silly masses, they had a notion to bring to ruin the towns and everything around them. They were unmoved by the concerns of western senates.

The races that had poured into these great urban realms of the west – toiling playing freeloading multiplying – originated in the prairies of Nebraska Dakota Nevada, remnants of Whites Mestizos Zambos, descendants of Negroes mixed-race Indians. After the old ethnicities in the towns fragmented, everything had to be built anew. In the Pacific centres under Mongoloid supremacy, it all soon faltered. The Asiatics applied pressure on the self-governing zones – Francisco Portland the occupied hinterland. The last great clans, their wealth derived from technical mysteries, kept Meki-factories working, sought a connection with the masses. The towns seethed, disorganised hungry forever undermining themselves. People were stuck in a curious kind of fortress, besieged, an enemy among them. An enraged unemployed mass milled about in the great boulevards, poorly informed about external events, searching for allies.

The old Indian belief in a good and an evil power prevailed among the masses; people consulted soil ashes bird-bones. Rumours started in Dakota, spread swiftly to the west coast: people must abandon the cities, move north to Canada, to the lands of the Iriquois, the indented coast, the archipelago of big islands, into Yukon Territory. In the parks of Francisco there appeared men from western townzones who struck round red stones from their mountains against white stones, and from the splinters foretold surprising events, prophesied a breakout to the north. As in the Marcher

zone, the fettered masses threw themselves into wrestling hunting stalking, deceptions and savagery, formed warlike secret societies. There was dim knowledge of Marduk's struggle with the Communal League; the name Marduk became a secret password. The Asiatics heard it, mocked the towns: "Marduks!"

They fell silent when all stores of food in Francisco and Portland went up in flames one day. They were faced with the question: allow millions to die of hunger, or abdicate their rule. They flashed messages westward to their homeland. Soothing replies: had they grown timid, or were they now agents of American savages. They redoubled defences around the towns.

Three weeks after the first destruction of the food stores, in Francisco and Portland the factories themselves were burned down all on the same day. Explosives had been sneaked in. At the same time attacks were made on the residences of the Mongol occupiers, leading to a city-wide storming of all such buildings. Just an hour after the factories were blown up, the first frightened desperate human masses left the burning factories to launch themselves against the foreigners' ray-barriers around government buildings. They were a half-naked rabble, close to death, cannibals filled with self-loathing. They choked in the rays, fell onto the parched yellow lawns around the buildings.

New masses stormed up. Latecomers aiming at the periphery found themselves trapped, moved towards the centre. A wall of corpses built up around the Mongol buildings, higher minute by minute. Ragged people, women holding infants, excited raging men knew they would be shown no mercy; the most savage act they could inflict on themselves was to die here. Endangered warriors, members of the secret leagues, kept to the background, inciting: "Grab them, grab them!" Their cries rang out for hours against the silent Mongol buildings. The hill of corpses was already so high it could be surmounted only by ladders.

Now league members began to move unnoticed through the crowds. Suddenly, through the roaring, a crack! Crack boom. Warriors, moving forward singly using the corpse wall as cover, hurled explosives like those they had used on the factories that morning. The Mongols, alarmed, kept their nerve. Now they knew for sure: the oppressed were seeking a decision.

So they rolled open the iron gates of the buildings. The oppressors emerged, seen by those expiring on the wall of corpses. Seen only for a second. For they changed colour with the ground they moved on, blended with the background. Shimmering grey-green bodies in a moving flashing flickering frame. Very rapidly, hardly touching the ground, they crossed the parched lawns in front of the building. As they approached the corpse wall it began to smoke, smouldered melted. The mob behind pulled back. But only those nearest. At their back was the whole living town. Through the smoking slumping corpse wall, through the burning people came Japanese, greenish shimmering figures, now and then pausing, losing some beneath a thunderclap, but moving ever faster, darting in all directions. Almost cleared the town, emptied the streets. Flew over the streets, hurled fire down. They made no effort to calm those pursuing them, emerged anew into smoke-filled plazas.

The glittering figures kept going until evening. In darkness they landed on the smouldering lawns, returned to their buildings. They threw off their clothing, climbed into hot baths. They giggled, fooled around. Their women appeared with wine; they hurried through the building, embraced the men. And when they uncoiled, a tomtom began to beat. They went slowly in long bright gowns, holding flowers, into the great hall on the ground floor, the Assembly Room. A coloured Buddha portrait hung on the wall. They placed the flowers before it, bowed low, left the hall. They sat, silent at first, in the ornate dining room at low tables, ate and drank. Acrid choking smoke drifted in from the plaza, although doors and windows were all closed. After half an hour of silence, the bald man at the head of the tables waved away the two singing-girls who had entered with their lutes.

Chin in hand, he observed the men nearest him: "How old are my friends? Very young. Is it a shame that they have left their homes, flown here across the water? Very young: that's no shame. When is it a shame, anything that one engages in as a youth? Only when it lasts too long."

Another silence. Thickset Yari spoke, eyes down: "Thank you for those words. I wear bright garments, as befits a victor. I want to go on being a victor. You have said what I must do."

At the tables they murmured, nodded. By and by all stood up. Were no longer grave. Smiled to one another. Someone called: "Bring on the singing girls." The bald man beamed. When five girls, delicate in red scarves, went bright-eyed among the tables, the young men took them by the hand. In the thronging hall that could hardly maintain its composure, they sang in twos and threes and fives.

By the light of a full moon, two hours later they cut through the air above the dead flame-lit town. Silently they destroyed the peripheral barriers, turned west to the ancient surging sea.

Waves, waves, moonlit glinting rolling vanishing expanses, swelling buoyant wind. In a few days the Asiatic occupiers had withdrawn from every American zone.

Along the coast the surviving human masses poured north into the mountains, having laid waste to the deserted towns. Leaders of the no longer secret leagues drew the masses into open country. They abandoned Nevada Washington Oregon Idaho, trekked into Columbia, drew town after town behind them, filled the expanse between the islanded coast and the stony desolate Rocky Mountains. They welled up towards Yukon, where soared the mighty frozen peak of Mount Saint Elias. Some crossed the pass to the east, saw Athabasca spread before them. On the way thousands lost heart and turned back. The leaders with their auguries of soil and stone urged drove relentlessly on. Without mistrust, often joyfully they were welcomed looked after guided by the remnants of the mother-tribes settled in little villages along the northwest coast, Tlingit Haida Tsimshian Willapa. Many suffered misery and disaster in the next few years. It was

merciless, the sudden transition from the welfare of the giant zones to the sea's wild energy, contact with wild animals. Tree-felling, catching salmon with spears and traps, catching cod smelt halibut among the islands, in the Dixon Entrance, Chatham Strait, hunting bears – this was now their life. Drinking raw warm blood, eating raw liver were holy acts. Marduk was already dead, power-hungry Zimbo already seated in the Council House in Berlin when the first dim warnings and threats began to emerge from these indianised hordes of the American northwest, under their prophet-leaders.

DELEGATION FROM AMERICA

BUT THE Communal League, coming together and for the first time defending itself, failed to overcome the two fires: one from Berlin, the other from western America. Envoys from America appeared at the London Senate, people at home in the smouldering landscape of the Northwest. They had been chosen as Washington's representatives. Klokwan was the oldest of the four slow people who sat in woollen blankets on the benches of London, impassively watching the streets. They squatted for hours. Only when they played Pick-up-sticks, watched by fascinated locals, did they grow lively. They had slaves with them, male and female, Mestizos, and a number of tobacco-chewing women who trotted behind, during discussions lay on mats on the ground covered in otter skins, head resting on an arm. Conversations with them had to take place in parks, gardens. Closed spaces, especially the giant towers of London, made them nervous.

Francis Delvil, the London Senator, often had warm wine served to them. The thin well-meaning man had acquired a slack weary face. They sat together in an autumnal park in Aldershot. He smiled sadly at his English friends, frowned: "If I see things clearly, we are in the same situation as – how should I put it – as we were at a bad time. When Rallignon, that great Frenchman, and Leuchtmar travelled around the Continent. Then the Urals War came."

"Who is our enemy?" Round-faced Klokwan, playing with autumn leaves, stroked grey hair back from his face.

"The enemy, Klokwan, yes. It's hard to be sure just now. That's the problem."

"I don't know if it's the worst problem. We come from America, we flew over the west coast of Africa. We saw nothing different from back home, maybe more acute, heading for savagery. Zones burning. People fighting. Many zones half empty. People can see their ruin. They are afraid. Meki-bread Meki-meat doesn't taste so good."

"So they want to go into the wilderness, be torn to pieces by wild animals?"

"So it seems, Delvil. I don't know. It's no different in Dakota on the Mississippi in Mexico on the Salt Lake, all over the south. I mean: we must not forget this. How can these people be reined in. They no longer look to us. It is actually, I beg your pardon, the exact opposite of the time of Rallignon and Leuchtmar, who concocted a war to sweep their people away. Is it not? But we don't know how to control them."

Delvil tugged moodily at the big chain on his chest. "Where did we go wrong, what mistakes are we making?"

Stout red-cheeked White Baker: "Do you recall, Delvil, and – where's Pember? Ah, there you are – do you recall our visit to Marduk? That strange Town Hall in Berlin, the pyramid of skulls, the dreadful pictures. I shudder at the memory. Marduk wouldn't yield. We told him there was no sense in his actions. He remained obdurate. Finally I advised that we go on the offensive. Delvil, it was you who brandished your fists like a boxer and said: if the land is calm, we are calm and gentle, we water it as with rain. That's what you said, as I remember. But if the Consul wishes otherwise, then we can also hurl thunder. We had Marduk in our grasp."

"That's what I said. What of it?"

"Nothing, Delvil. No point revisiting your error. We've often spoken of it. But I repeat what I said then: go on the offensive."

Delvil flexed his arms: "That's what I thought, wasn't it, White Baker? But friend Klokwan here has already posed the decisive question. Tell me: where, if I take aim and shoot, is our target?"

"It's either the Communal League, or the others. Delvil, you lot, you cannot doubt it. Or that they want to go at our throats. That we risk being annihilated, liquidated."

Klokwan, listening intently, had let his blanket drop: "I ask the lady again, as Mr Delvil has, where will she direct her arrows. Francis Delvil, my good friend, began by saying we are like our ancestors before the Urals War. I said not so. Our situation is worse. He can see it. Because we have no enemy."

White Baker gave an arrogant laugh: "Our ancestors too had no enemy. Really, they hadn't. They fabricated one. It's easy to make enemies of people, when you're sovereign. They had a pain in their chest and hit out – at another's chest!"

The women on the mats laughed, their eyes blinked at her. Klokwan gathered his blanket, looked silently at the women. His three male companions sat covered, heads blanketed, only mouth and nose free. Klokwan: "And your own chest? Did the pain go from your own chest?"

White Baker: "Yes."

One of the men beside Klokwan had drawn his blanket back to the shoulder. He whispered to the woman at his feet,

then whispered to Klokwan. Everyone in the draughty tent looked at him. Klokwan lowered his head to the man, then asked to be allowed to speak. A woman of his tribe, Rachenila, knows something, let her explain.

The woman on the ground spat tobacco, sat up, smoothed her black hair, spoke softly and slowly, hands now in her lap, now at her earrings. She looked only at the women beside her.

Back home in our American towns, a story is told of the times when our people still hunted in the mountains. Once, several girls went looking for fruit in the forest, one was a chief's daughter. They came on the trail of an animal, there was bear scat. The chief's daughter began to talk mockingly of the beast: it was a slow blind fat stupid creature. Towards evening they turned back. Then the basket of fruit fell from the chief's daughter's hand. She shook it out, packed it again, the others helped. But another hundred steps the basket fell again, and a hundred steps after that. Now the other girls were annoyed, went ahead, left her alone to pick up the fruit. And by the time the chief's daughter had picked it all up, the other girls were out of sight. She stood alone by a tree, in the darkening dusk, could not see the path. Then a slender young man appeared, in a black fur cap, a solemn calm man. He asked if he could eat some fruit. She gave him some, explained what had happened, she had lost her way.

"How did you lose your way?"

"The others went on so fast, they wouldn't help me."

And then she told about the bear trail and the scat on the path, laughed and mocked again. The young man stopped eating the fruit, chewed his nails, said he knows the path, come along. They walked slowly, it was quite dark now. After a while the pretty man asked if she still had the basket, and he took it and threw it away. She hit out at him, wept. He said without it we can walk easier and faster, there's a long way to go. She tried to run away, but he took her hand.

Now she was frightened, because now she could see how strangely he walked, the young man, ponderous and slow, wiggly waggly. She cried out: I have a stitch, I can't go on. And then: my tummy hurts from all the berries. He told her come along, we'll soon be there. There where the light gleams, that's my dwelling. But he didn't say dwelling, he said dwella. She giggled, pushed him in the chest, looked at him: it's not dwella, it's dwelling. "Yes. we say 'dwella'." "That's ridiculous. So who are you people?" "Us? You know us. You'll see in a minute. Hurry up."

And now there was a huge split tree trunk, an old dead sycamore. A ruddy glow and smoke came from it. They climbed in as if through a hole in the roof, made their way carefully down, deep down until they reached the roots under the earth. A little fire was burning. Two black grizzly bears were sleeping side by side, one young one old. They were snoring. A big old bear came grunting with its front paws up, towards the young man and the chief's daughter. She screamed, tried to run away. The man held her tight, she stumbled on a root, brought soil crashing down. That woke the other two bears. They stood up rumbling, rubbed their eyes, shook off black soil, asked who's breaking the dwella, shouted: "Who's breaking our dwella?" Despite her fear the girl laughed at their words, the grizzlies' stumbling growls and antics. The young man grabbed her by the foot, brought her down. The two bears tottered close. She fainted.

And when she woke up, an old man and an old woman were sitting beside her friend. Their faces were sad. The pretty young man was sitting beside them, eating fish. The chief's daughter asked where am I. She saw her basket, wanted it, wanted to go home. The old man and old woman looked at her so sadly and said she has camed to them in their dwella, doesn't she want to stay. They spoke wrong, like little children, stuck out their tongues. The pretty young man gave her the basket. She should tuck into the fruit with him. My parents have already tucked in, I won't let you go. At first she didn't want to, wept. She saw they were the stupid black grizzlies of yesterday, and the pretty young man was just a young bear. But she couldn't leave. The young bear took her to wife. And – and – and she lived there ever after.

The woman laughed, lay back leaning on her arm. Grey Klokwan gazed down at her: "Now you no longer mock the stupid black bear. It wasn't so stupid after all."

"A curious tale you've told us," Francis Delvil smiled after a pause. Then he looked across at White Baker, whose grave features had not twitched once, even as her face blushed deep red during the story. "White Baker. I'd like to hear from you."

She shook her head. "Leave it, Delvil. Some other time."

"Yes, where's the target I should aim for. Best look away: it's our own breast."

White Baker stood up. She was pale; the foreign women had thrown her into confusion.

Later, walking alone with Delvil, she haltingly suggested she cannot acknowledge these men and women as representatives of America. They belong to savage tribes from the Yukon and Alaska, not really Americans. Their words are excited, unclear. "That's as maybe," Delvil glanced at her, "but Washington and New York sought them out to deliver a message to us. That much is understood. It means they're our people. We're grateful for the cue. We see. It's the same nut that breaks our teeth."

White Baker's eyes blazed. "Strike, I say. My mind is unchanged. Break away. Yes or no. Marduk or us. Do you think," she stood arms akimbo, stared at him in agitation: "well, I think you must be stumbling around in that dead tree, with the bears."

During conversations with Klokwan and in phone calls with Washington and New York, it gradually became clear that on that side no possibility of a new Communal League was envisaged. The events on the West Coast had had enormous impact. The feared movement had still not appeared. The emptying of whole great zones had shaken Europe and America. The American delegates, always ready to leave, were detained in London by the nervous English. A tense struggle began between London and New York. London allowed its stance to become evident: the men and women setting themselves against industries and senates came now from weaker clans; the old tradition was broken. They fought

with words over the waves. Meanwhile the blanket-clad men and women and their slaves strolled through city parks, urged: there is nothing more we can say, and what should we report back to our continent.

It was in these critical months when the Communal League began to dissolve that the same White Baker, this clever and energetic woman, turned and joined Delvil's side. Delvil and Pember were deeply affected when White Baker approached them one morning in the Senate chamber, pale and quiet, holding dusky blanket-clad Rachenila by the hand, sat down and for a long while did not speak. Rachenila laughed at the white woman, stroked her cheeks, leaned into her neck. White Baker looked down at her lap like a bashful young maiden, enjoyed the caress. Even as she spoke to the two men she held tight to the foreign woman's beringed hand.

Rachenila smiled at the men: "You think it is my fault that White Baker is sad and speaks differently? My people have a story. Someone, a man, an Elk, wanted to annoy another man, a Kanuk, and one night shoved dogshit under his blanket. He woke him up and said: it stinks. You Kanuk, get up, you've made a mess. I – I have done nothing to White Baker."

The white woman squeezed her hand harder, squinted: "How is it, Delvil, that you saw so much earlier than I what needs to be done? What manner of men are you. Or is it all up to me. At the moment," she lowered her strong brown head, "at the moment I am almost more inclined to go to Marduk or Zimbo, rather than remain in London."

Pember calmly tapped her on the knee. "It's good. You can fight better when you know how strong the enemy is."

"I see no enemy, Pember."

"But there is. Not today, but tomorrow."

What most affected White Baker, who in those days seemed ill and broken, was her contact with the women of the delegation. She was drawn reluctantly, astonished at herself, to their ways, their chatter and games. When Rachenila saw the growing curiosity and amenability of this white woman, she approached her and ensnared her in affection. White Baker, whose cheeks were suddenly hollow, her speech slow, begged Delvil that he and Pember and the others should pay no attention to her. Shouldn't allow themselves to be swayed by her in the least, she's just a pathological case.

Slim Delvil, thoughtful, stroked her hand: "In what respect, White Baker, are you a pathological case. We are all pathological cases. Look at Klokwan, his girlfriend Rachenila, young yellow Kaskon at her side: all unstable. Why are you a pathological case. All it is, is that you were – shall we say – a little backward."

"Why was I backward, Delvil?"

"Well, you were an anachronism. We, less so. But even we were, just a little. The point is always to find one's way with the times. Otherwise one is foolish stubborn contrary. And it's no use. One becomes merely the stuff of tragedy."

"I should have stayed stronger. Marduk was strong."

Delvil put an arm on her shoulder. "Ungrateful woman. Fabulous sea monster whale, always swimming below the surface and wondering what it's like up there. What could you have done with it. You're not weak, because you have learned to use your eyes. I tell you, Marduk was strong. His trees and Zimbo's don't grow in the sky. Who has eyes to see, White Baker, swims gladly with the current. But the current has a limit; there are rocks, the river ends eventually."

"I can't listen to this, Delvil." She shook off his arm. "It seems I have never surfaced, quite the opposite. Perhaps I must let my eyes grow used to it." She walked slowly away. Delvil sat there, glum.

The united London Senate, freed of the strong woman's opposition, from this moment on hardened its stance against the unstable American centres. Don't let go the reins, don't give in, was their sentiment. Don't go off the rails, tip over.

GHOSTS AND DRAMAS

IN THE BRITISH Isles at this time, following the retreat of the great monotheistic religions, there emanated from the circles of the rulers the concept of good and evil forces, which people should acknowledge and make shrewd use of. The old One God was worshipped by some individuals and by some entire townzones, but in the British Isles and in many continental zones great reverence was accorded to cunning men, who gave themselves the airs of sorcerers and had devised techniques to foretell the future. Even earlier, the half-wild alien masses surging back and forth across the continents had become devoted to magical personages enveloped in an impressive illusion of scientific mystery. Now the stagnating masses, veering as they declined between lassitude and agitation, shocked by the barbaric events in Berlin and on the northwest coast of America, averse to all war, seized by a profound urge to distance themselves from synthetic food, machines, senatorial oversight, disenfranchisement, grasped for knowledge of a future they feared. Feared all the more the less they dared to act, to change their situation.

Mediums, oracles made of ashes earth potions, sat like priests in temple-like buildings where with the help of assistants they performed cult-like actions, healing ceremonies. In silent spaces beneath symbols of animals and plants they sat in little greenhouses, flat basins of reeds before them, listened to the noise made by the rustling stalks as the breeze blew in. On high ground behind the temple they erected an open pavilion. They covered the floor with silvered

glass, strewed fine sand on the blank surface, on specified days let the wind stir it. Prophesied from the streaks and little heaps. People brought dreams to them. The conjurers and sign-readers listened to the dream, pondered, tracked the forces that had forced their way into the dream like a pod of whales that stir the sea as they surface, making little boats rock. The towns of this age were full of people who believed in ghosts. Fantastical notions flourished the more as ruling clans strengthened their control over natural forces and kept their knowledge secret.

Posing as astrologers in their dark chapels, clad in phosphorescent often blazing robes, long hair, wide hats like lilies, making vague oracular utterances in a costume of bird beast plant, shamans flung bizarre notions into the restless zones. Every day carts laden with balls barrels sacks of Meki-foodstuffs emerged from subterranean vaults to make deliveries to every house. Work-groups had dissolved. Fat bloated enfeebled people, halfbreeds of White and Red Indian, hordes of dusky mongrels slouched around in fine clothes, squandered what they had. These fearful people were surrounded by ghosts.

The shamans whispered: in the Meki-factories, unbelievably horrible things are done. They pile stones sand soil salts in the yards of the facilities, mills and crushing machines work away, wind blows through the buildings; they stir the mixture into huge basins with half-dead vegetation, trickle it over dying animals. These they keep alive, keep alive. Even before the Urals War there was vegetation, a green layer on the ponds in the facilities; they washed salts and soil through it. Human limbs lay there twitching, Negro and White, said to be a hundred years old, older. They live on the spirits of those dying mosses algae animals people, those fat-producing guts livers fish-bodies sheep-stomachs. How could stones soil salts chalk gravel water acids air be turned into the food we eat. In Meki-factories they tend the half-dead, the never-dying. No light of moon or sun shines in. No rain falls. There's no spring summer autumn winter. Nothing but glass tubes, hot ovens, basins of marble and metal exposed to invisible rays, and in these they squeeze the substances together. But the never-dying plants and animals are forever harried to toil and never stop. Like a weary beast, ribs showing, whipped on to run and run, it obeys the whip, no longer bothers to whimper, eyes downcast beneath the blows – that's how these exhausted spirits toil.

Tasty as they are, how bitter these foods seem on many a day. And yet these spirits are the only thing that has entered into them. For the rest, all you scoff is soil sand air salt. You are no different from those trapped plants and beasts. What does not live cannot die. Dying is a capability, like living. The ability to die is a power that only the living can possess.

And now came the climax of the shamanistic doctrine. They had observed and ascertained in a myriad ways that the townzones, their buildings factories plazas streets stairs lanes roofs, are filled and saturated with ghosts. When the shamans wrap themselves in their cloaks so that they cannot be harmed, and then at certain hours go through the streets calling the ancient Indian words "O Igak-chuati" – "For Thee!" – then they can see them through their glasses, teeming. Spirits ever thronging around the temples, in the courtyards, outside doors. More of them near the temples than elsewhere. Dangling from doorposts like handkerchiefs, they stretch thin as worms through keyholes, drift like smoke into walls. People think they are vapour that you can walk through. But they move so cold and uncanny, creepy and crawly, leave damp and wetness on your skin, you can hardly breathe among them. All kinds of creatures, white halfbreed coloured, children men girls, as well as dogs cagebirds cats. Out in the streets there are thousands. In the parks it's terrifying how they bump around. They twine around each other, dangle swaying in treetops. In autumn they crawl into gaps in the bark, holes in the earth, try to enter the roots. Many trees are covered in them, like swarms of bees. Only when the shaman comes do they loosen their grip, whirl away high with a rushing sound, like a wetted finger sliding down a lutestring.

"When we call 'For Thee, for Thee!" they calm down, act as if we're not there, as busy as ants. What sort of people dogs cagebirds cats are these? Some of them we know. Some are not from here, wandered flew floated here from far away. From foreign zones, lands of the east the south. Many must have crossed the sea, how hard their journey must have been. Had to cling to the masts of ships, be flung about by the wind, blown into the salty sea and lifted up again. There are ancients among them. The wind, the impetus seems to come from south and east towards the west. We have met huge crowds of spirits and ghosts from the Urals War. No one in the western townzones understands what it is there that drives and unsettles them. Wherever they pass by they make people weak, paralyse the soul day by day. They wander ever farther west, across the ocean, to America, over great mountains, prairies, through cities. Not a single Asian human, not a single Asian animal is among them, even though these populate half the Russian plain. We are so close to the centre of Europe, yet we have never seen a person, a spirit, from the land of Marduk, of Zimbo. What are these spirits? Neither living nor dead! Ghosts of beings like us, born but never flourished."

And they pointed to the lanky wasted arms of their believers, their weak muscles. How your hair falls out a few years after puberty, a time of violent overheated lust when you're on fire; and after a few years you can no longer reproduce. How women melt into their fat and can hardly give birth. People flicker for thirty years, then die. These are your spirits, the ghosts of parents grandparents siblings, pressing and thronging and filling the cities, they cannot come free from the walls towers streets, just as they could not come free while they lived. They fly to trees, to ponds and lakes. But always the towns bring forth more.

Such words shook the towns. Fed the fears of everyone who lived ailed sickened in the towns. People wept. Decades earlier some individuals had wept, now whole towns whimpered laments. They saw themselves dying, mouldering away. Their lives shortened, bodies decaying. At the age of twenty, teeth could be pulled painlessly from the jaws between two fingers. People never grew as big as their ancestors. Only the head everywhere was a great swelling; the brows of later

generations were prominent; deepset eyes below. In some regions people grew unnaturally tall, their bones two yards long, thin smooth muscles pasted onto them. They walked slowly, the heart was too small; these types fell apart at an early age.

People who survived to twenty stored up inordinate amounts of fat. In the western townzones were people with big bony heads, throat wobbling between plump jowls, but on the arms and legs fat hung literally in blobs and bags that swelled over fingers and toes, made walking grasping laborious. Over some the fat grew like a malign parasite, grew from top to toe: neck and chest remained narrow, the head above gazed out friendly and helpless. From the chest down they began to swell, rolls of fat thickening; the body expanded to three times the width of the chest, not swaying when it moved, the mass solid and steady. Legs and feet were wrapped like bulging parcels. People stomped about in them, groaned stared like pyramids of flesh. Depending on the race they filled out or stayed thin, grew tall; descendants of Negroes fattened quickest. In some regions a few grew up with knobby swellings and knots at the joints, like plants. Slender delicate limbs flexed from huge round hinges, trembled. Thick knobby elbows, tiny finger joints knees bones of feet and hands. These could move fast, had the strongest muscles, but they quickly faltered weakened ossified. They all sensed it must come from the sweet peculiarly rich food they were given, that their parents and grandparents had demanded; from inactivity, lounging in houses made weatherproof, in covered malls and streets. But it was like a runaway horse, no one could stop it.

The sorcerers were besieged by weeping crowds, victims of paralysing ailments none could name or cure. The lame were legion. Arms and legs grew limp, eyelids could not open, in the end they choked, others had to feed them. The mouth could not feel food, they swallowed, gurgled. There were no doctors for these people, doctors belonged to senatorial circles, kept quiet. The sick the wretched listened avidly to the shamanic mysteries. Long lines flew or drove to the hills where the little temples stood, gathered like winter birds around a feeder. Showed arms and legs. Bodies and faces looked ghastly in the harsh light of day. Many died at such gatherings. Many refused to be carried back. The sorcerers had to summon nearby settlers to build huts for the despairing. Some recovered. When people from the heated artificial towns climbed up and looked around at the fields and little hills, their misery was great. Angry soft fist-shaking complaints were muttered hissed swallowed down.

Near Bedford a woman sang, cried out: “I am a woman. My parents, my grandparents lived in London. They came from Africa or America, were strong. Then magic spells were cast on them. They grew weak. They went to the witch-doctor’s house. They had no need to fear, to go thirsty, hungry, no one now could mess them about. No one could finish them off with spear dagger gun. See my fingers, my neck, my breasts. I am a woman. Twenty years old. I had two children. Both dead. And am I alive? It’s no gun that’s finishing me off. But what to do. Am I fat? Am I human? Must I die now? I want to die, I don’t want to live like this. Every morning when I wake up I curse myself. Who made me like this? I myself. I myself. I knew no better. The bosses in the towns know what they’re doing. They’re the wicked ones. Wicked to me, to everyone. Decades ago they made a war. Now they make war on me. Tell me they’re not winning, the wicked ones. Wicked. Wicked.” The woman jabbered, lay on the ground beside a settler, chewed grass. “Should have all sunk down in the earth with those who went off to the war. What sorrow. I should have sunk down in the earth with my babies. I am nothing. Barren, can’t run, can’t hold, can’t swallow. Buried alive. I have to scream.”

And yet when people hurried away they felt fearful: they could lose the towns, would have to leave their houses, no one would give them food, they’d be forced to think for themselves how to live. They were not inclined to wildness like those before the Urals War. Rather, were soft tender immature, sunk in thought, racked by feelings, eager for stimulus, keen on finery, meek. Ready to pray, to serve, fluttering from one hour to the next, clinging sensuously to life. From time to time ideas of persecution swept across the continents, people bowed beneath them, spoke of them in horror, after a while shook them off, more terribly preoccupied than before.

And always new people among them. The urge of the African continent to send its children north and west had never ceased. The southern continent, its settlements almost all destroyed, poured people out like sun and heat.

The people who had the deepest and most distinctive impact on the cities of Europe came from West Africa. They were Fula from the Guinea coast, were Mandarawa Bagirmi Wadai Igbo Yoruba, little pilgrim communities from Kordofan and Sennar. They were of a delicate stature with a high rounded forehead, big open expressive eyes, skin reddish brown to yellow, ever active, playfully boisterous; curiously fractured characters, now soft and melting, now unyielding. They quickly thronged into every zone, their presence lent a special air to the life of the city. Soon no one could do without the glamour and vivacity, the unshakeable naivety of these people who showed themselves not at all inclined to fight back. They felt as much at home in Europe as raindrops, not strange at all, were saddened by attacks on them, hid away for a time, emerged again.

Europeans had never heard anything like the songs and tales of these men and women from Mandara and Bagirmi. The sweetness of their tales and songs melted every heart, as those of the jongleurs and troubadours of southern France and the Po plain had done centuries before. They sang and told of trees, the sky, rain-spouts, deer, tigers, lions, cold and heat, vines, black magic. Of waterfalls pelicans crocodiles. And of the beauty of the great cities to which they had migrated; they named these in their skits, creating an incongruous effect. They wrapped in tenderness the streets shop-windows fashions cars planes electrical and magnetic devices, the food; applied to them expressions that the locals at first found comical, because they were normally used only for things long gone. But their manner was sweetly endearing, and people willingly let their heartstrings be plucked. They were vain, overjoyed when given the chance to show off, beamed when people applauded.

After a while they were everywhere. Sprouting like grass, they had introduced a novel elusive element into the rattling already lamed noisy howling machine-mighty world cities. The men and women who drove technology on and steered industries, the melting pot of races enfeebling itself in the Meki-works were moved by these young things around whom everything revolved.

But soon rulers and leaders, the intellects of the intertwined convulsing gently yielding mega-settlements, would see these amusing people in a different light. In London Le Havre Hamburg, the Fula built their little theatres. Built them, on the anxious advice of priests, away from towns in forests, performed for their audiences compelling tender comedies fairytales love stories. Very rarely there came outbreaks of happy laughter, or of fear. For these graceful strangers were slowly infected by the general dread that reigned in the huge urban centres.

FIRST SKIT: MANSU THE KING

THEY PERFORMED the fate of a great king. He conquered all the neighbouring kings and drove their ponderous bodies, victory fanfares blaring, in fetters to his house. He tamed rivers. They had to flow where he wanted, water his parched fields so that palms and breadfruit grew, had to flow against cliffs to undercut them, wash them away. At his command they flowed into his house, crawled through narrow pipes, crawled into every room, those wild waters from the cataracts. Soon he had piled up so much gold and finery from his victories and rapacious raids, buckles rings carts, that his sheds and barns could not hold it all. The graceful Fula, these brown men and maidens with their crinkly hair, showed what happened next.

How the great ruler sat in the hall of his palace, and all the stuff pressed in around him because he would not let it from his sight: it reflected his glory. They showed the paradise of Mbutiland in the African interior, its verdant rolling valleys, slopes draped in banana trees and oil palms, groves, springs beyond counting. Sugarcane grew thick along riverbanks, sweet potato on the sunsoaked hills, vast fields of peanuts sesame tobacco. But the king, bloated black-bearded face, big earlobes pierced with thick smooth copper rods, on his head a huge hat with swaying plumes of peacock and parrot, flabby womanly bosom bared, on it a hundredweight of gold and silver chains, copper rings, carved amulets, heavy copper plates on the fat slack arms, around the veined swelling calves. In the dangling right hand his sickle-shaped chiselled sabre with the pearl inlay. Mansu the King behind his stockade now never left the palace. He grew fatter and fatter on his splendid throne. His wives massaged him. Every day another must come. It pleased him to have movement all about, to behead them when they were done and he felt comfy on his throne. More and more stuff was heaped around him: lion's fangs, great piles of civet skins, giraffe tails. Next to his hall were storehuts and granaries, directly in his line of sight the armoury along the passage to the door, with spearheads daggers shields sabres machetes.

He swelled and swelled, Mansu. Became immobile, wedged in the woven seat that had become his bed and dining table. More and more trinkets were strung about his neck. From each of his teeth a copper ring hung on a hempen thread. Under his hat his hair was twisted in little braids, on every braid an amulet to ward off ailments. The skin of upper arms and thighs was pierced, cords passed through for the skulls of neighbouring kings conquered by his warriors. His narrow throne room of solid logs with just one door, one window, grew dark with the piled up pelf. Just one narrow passage was kept clear. Then one morning King Mansu yawned awake and slurped his palm wine, swung the sickle-shaped sabre and called for his women. Day would soon dawn. Behind the hills of skins and lion fangs he heard horns and flutes and his wives singing: "Ei, ei, Munsa chupi, chupi ei." He called and waited, slurped some more, grew angry, his face turned blue, he tossed about, called again. Bobbing before him the big fly-whisks, bunches of red parrot feathers. Beyond the hills of skins the tootling and trilling continued.

But suddenly something was moving in the passage. A dainty little man came slowly down the narrow space, pulling a barrow behind him. Bowed: I bring gifts from the Babuker, who as the Great King knows are his loyal servants. From the little cart he lifted great round lumps wrapped in leaves, laid them down beside the king. The king sat up, stared at him, roared: "I want my women," thrust his sabre at the little man, who stepped smartly aside, calmly unloaded yet more lumps.

"Cheese. They are cheeses," he whispered. "We are poor people, goatherds. The Masana have more, the Mongo have more; we are merely goatherds. It's goat's cheese, you'll like it."

Mansu, half out of his seat, snapped at air, tugged at his trinkets. The women close by behind the civet skins were still trilling their "Ei, ei, Munsa chupi, chupi ei." And as the sweaty king, frantic with foreboding, pressed an amulet to his brow, the little man vanished, bleating: "They're very tasty, you must try them. The Babuker are your loyal subjects."

The fly-whisks stirred. He opened his eyes wide, called out. Behind the plumes an old man was rocking left and right in the passage, the big straw cloak on his head and body left only eyes and nose free. He had the face the gait the voice of the king's witch-doctor. Would not approach, ignored Mansu's command. "You are sick, Mansu," he whispered kowtowing.

“Bring me a potion to make me better, or I’ll beat you to death.”

The witch-doctor whispered to the ground: “I have the potion. I knew you were sick. I’ve brought it with me. It’s here, under my cloak. I mixed it an hour ago in the temple.”

“Give.”

“I cannot.”

“Give. Give it me. I’ll cut off your head.”

“You must take it with water, at sunrise, out there in the temple.”

“Give it here. I’m not going outside.”

“Come,” the witch-doctor cajoled; he retreated a little, “or it won’t work.”

The king rose snorting, called help to his women. “You must come,” whispered straw-cloak man to the ground. “The sun will be up soon, the potion will spoil, you might die.”

“Wait, wait,” Mansu threatened as he stood, fumbled on the throne for his sickle-sabre, fell back. The witch-doctor cajoled: “Come, come. I’ll put the potion down by the door. Here, you can see it.”

Mansu stumbled from the dais, picked himself up. Tried to loosen the cords holding the heavy hangings around his neck, could not; his hand snagged on the tangle of rings and chains.

“Here’s the potion. By the door. Hurry. The sun will soon be up.”

The king groaned, the passage was too narrow. Lion fangs tipped his tall hat down, it flapped against his mouth. He turned sideways, he was too fat, could not come through. He roared to the witch-doctor, to his wives: “I can’t come through.” The witch-doctor was gone. The trilling behind the hills of skins hummed soft and jaunty; clappers clapped, this pleased the king in his half-daze. He wrestled with the pile of skins and tails sliding down onto him. He assailed them with his sickle-sabre. He fought them. More and more slid down. He shoved back at them.

There’s the potion, not far to the door. He dropped the sabre. His left hand was trapped in the chains at his throat, he couldn’t free it. Now screaming in fury he stomped forward. He tried to butt with his head through the skin-mountain. He turned and turned about. A heavy heap of giraffe tails slid skittering over him. He freed himself, tottered into a pile of dried bananas. And as he threshed around he pulled strings of lion fangs and a great big tusk down from the ceiling. They dealt him a heavy blow. His head was squashed. Bananas squeezed his throat, his screaming face.

Soft thick pulp rose up to his ears, blocked his snorting nostrils, filled his gaping mouth. He gulped at it, spat, spat, tried to scoop it with his hands; they were jammed fast against his knees, he couldn’t feel them. His head jerked this way and that like a fish out of water. Then the sweet pulp engulfed him entirely. His jaws ceased working, the panic in his eyes faded. He suffocated in the pulpy fruit, his legs sank as into a swamp. Hours later, when his wives arrived to the tootling of flutes, they found him quite buried in the soft churned mess. The women, the sons praised his death; they wept: such a kingly death.

And the dusky players hauled the dead man from his yellow coffin, sponged him down, set him on his feet. He pulled on his big tall hat. They danced together around the stage, spitting pulp. The king danced in the puddle, on his fat legs.

SECOND SKIT: HUBEANE

THEY PERFORMED on wooded hills south of the London townzone, near Guildford on the River Wey, near Tonbridge to the east. Many came to see them. Soon they headed south, beyond the zone. They set up their delightful little stages to the west of the city. They staged the antics of Hubeane, skits they improvised to reveal the lad’s whimsy.

His mother was walking across a field, a pitcher on her head. An antelope, a little thing, was sleeping among the pea plants. She threw a stone, killed it. Hubeane sauntered up singing, flicked round green peas at his mother. She scolded him: he should at least eat the peas he picked. He replied in surprise: but that’s why he’s flicking them at his mother, he trusts no food that hasn’t been near his mother.

She handed him her basket, pointed to the young antelope: “Hubeane my child, help me, put the antelope in the basket. And bring peapods to cover it entirely.”

He brought a heap of peapods: does such a young creature really need so many peas. Mother said: “We must cover it, else people will see it and take it off us. Carry the antelope home. And if anyone asks what you’re carrying, you must say: I’m carrying peapods for my mother. But in your heart you know: it’s a puti-antelope.” Hubeane took the basket, sauntered off. People asked what he was carrying. He looked at them, one to the other, laughed, kept laughing louder. They asked why he was laughing. “You must have met my mother. My mother sent you.”

“Your mother’s across the field with a pitcher, fetching water.”

“My mother sent you. She told me just now I would meet people and they’d ask what I’m carrying in the basket.” And he shook them by the hand, relishing his mother’s cleverness. The people followed close behind: “What’s in the basket.”

“I’m bringing peapods for my mother. But in my heart I know it’s a puti-antelope.” The people laughed: what jokes the boy told. A rascal went behind, pushed the pods aside, saw the young creature, tried to lift it from the basket. But he wouldn’t let him. “I must take it home.”

“Carry it to my house.”

He was happy to do so. “Well, I’ve brought the puti-antelope to a home,” he sighed contentedly as he put the basket down. They spitted the antelope. He was given a hunk, kept thanking them. They gave him a banana. He went to meet his mother. “Mother, this half a banana is for you, because you’re so clever and know everything ahead of time. But maybe you should give it back so I can take it to them. They let me share the puti-antelope. They were very polite, said our peas tasted good.”

People entrusted sheep to Hubeane, he had to sit on a rock and watch over them. Once a zebra lay dead in the grass. In the evening he drove the sheep home. The people asked where he had watched them. He thought a bit: “Today – I watched them from a rock with coloured stripes.” The people laughed, there were no rocks with coloured stripes in the neighbourhood. Next morning Hubeane went again to the meadow, sat by the dead zebra. It had started to rot. Hyenas were leaping around the carcase. When the lad came home that evening, he said: “Today I watched from a hyena rock.” The people were puzzled; yesterday striped rock, today hyena rock. They went with him to the meadow, saw the rotting zebra. The hyenas ran away. They shook their heads: “What are you up to, Hubeane. This is meat, very tasty. If you see a wild animal and it’s fallen down, you must quickly cover it with branches so nothing can drag it away, vultures and hyenas can’t take it. And then you must run home quickly and shout. Then we’ll come and fetch it.”

The lad pursed his lips, whistled thanks. And when a little lame bird hopped in the meadow near his feet, he jumped onto a sheep, heavy stick in his hand, chased whooping after it. He wanted to kill it. But the sheep wouldn’t run. Hubeane kicked it in the stomach, jumped off, dug a little pit trap, hid behind leafy branches he broke off, and with a triumphant yell leapt at the lame little bird when it fell in the trap. He stood shouting beside the pit, felt around blindly, shovelled soil in with his hands, threw branches in, ran home. He yelled with all his might: “Game! Game! I’ve killed wild game! With my own hands! Come, carry it back!” Men jumped up with knives, women dragged baskets, ran in jubilant Hubeane’s wake. “Here. It’s in here, under the branches. There!”

The men toiled, pulled up branches. The women stood about expectantly with their baskets. Hubeane whooped, commanded: “All the branches out! And the soil cleared away. I scared the beast into the pit. It didn’t see me. I hid behind leaves. I chased it into the pit, beat it and choked it.”

Stone after stone dropped from the soil they scooped. Hubeane checked every stone. “That’s not it. That’s not it.” The little bird dropped out. He whooped and danced: “There, it’s twitching. That’s the one. It’s still alive. Take a knife! Kill it.” The men lowered their hands, stared at him as he parried and thrust with his stick. Looked at one another. Trudged sadly home. His mother took him aside: “Child. That’s a little bird. It’s not a wild animal. When someone catches a little bird he doesn’t talk, doesn’t shout. He brings it home quietly in the dark.” He was all ears: “I’ll do that, mother.”

And once a huge bearded vulture came from the sky, plunged at a young lamb. Hubeane watched amiably from under his tree as the vulture seized the lamb and flew away. He laughed at the wailing lamb: “Why’s the lamb wailing. It’s flying through the air with the vulture, yet still it wails.” The vulture came back at midday, flapped close to Hubeane’s tree. He thought: “I’ll catch it.” Took off his belt, picked up his heavy stick, swung two or three times at the bird as it flew down, beat it, tied it in his jerkin. The vulture snapped, bit his arm, ripped his clothes. Hubeane fought the whole afternoon, grew exhausted. It was hard to drive the flock home that evening, with all his leaping and tumbling and beating the vicious bird down. Dogs rushed at him barking. Shrieking women met him at the entrance to the village, bleeding, clothes in shreds. Still struggling he panted out: “It’s nothing, just a little bird. I mustn’t shout. I’ve tied it up.” And afterwards would not be convinced when they told him: that bird carried off a little lamb and almost killed it. “That little bird?” Astonished, he let them bandage his wounds, looked reproachfully at his mother.

SKIT THREE: TIGER HUNT

HUBEANE’S father had had enough of his antics: he had made the man ridiculous in the eyes of the village by conveying false instructions, reporting events that never happened. He wanted to be rid of Hubeane. He took him along on a tiger hunt, and when they had the beast surrounded, hid him in a hollowed-out termite mound, hoping the tiger would storm the mound and rip Hubeane to pieces. They drove the panicked beast towards the mound. The father yelled in pretended alarm: “Hubeane, Hubeane! The tiger!” Hubeane didn’t appear. The tiger too vanished in the huge mound. After a while the men pushed forward to the beating of drums. Covered in dirt from head to toe, there was Hubeane at the entrance to the mound. “The tiger’s not here. I waited for it to come in. I made a hole for it on the other side. And when it rushed in it saw the hole. Quick as a flash he dashed through it and out.” He raised his hands in gratitude to the men and his father. “How you yelled. If you hadn’t yelled so loud, it would have stayed in the mound and eaten me.”

His father did not give up. Drove him out to the fields, disguised himself as a fox. Hubeana attacked it. Then Hubeane fled, called to the fox. The beast as it chased him fell into a dung pit. The fox scrabbled around down there, Hubeane called the people together, hit at it: “A demon!” Then they pulled the half-choked man out with sticks, and the son stroked him: “It was a demon, its skin is floating there, it swallowed you. Next time I’ll beat it to death.”

Around the time of the full moon, the end came. The father, barely able to contain his fury, stood a ladder against the hut where Hubeane was asleep, peered into the dark room through a hole in the roof. The father had tied on a big yellow moon-face that covered his head and chest. In his hands he clutched a bundle of spears. He was grim. He climbed laboriously up the ladder, still lame from the beating his son had given him. He muttered: “Hey! You down there! Up! Up! Hubeane!” The boy sat up in bed, trembling: “Who’s there?”

“The moon in the sky. Won’t you come and pray to me.”

“The moon! To me! Oh, I’m scared. I can’t look.”

“Come, look at me.” And as Hubeane crawled slowly from his bed of straw, the first spear swished towards him. He started back with a cry. The moon rumbled: “Come to me! Pray to me! These are my rays. My rays. Hey. Up now. Or I’ll eat you.”

“I’m not scared of you, good spirit, not at all. I’ll be right up. I’ll just fetch an umbrella, because your rays are so burning.”

“They don’t burn. Come now!”

The father skulked up there, peered down, couldn’t see his son. He blew his horn into the room, threatened: “Up, up! Get up, Hubeane.” He felt the ladder shaking. It swayed. And when he turned round, someone pinned his arms from behind. The father cried “Help!”

“Don’t shout, lovely moon. You’ll scare the people.”

“Hubeane.”

“You know my name, lovely moon. You see everything, know everyone in our village, all the hens, all the dogs. I couldn’t find my umbrella. Can only gaze on you from behind, you burn so from the front. Wait in my hut till I find the umbrella.” And he lifted the squirming man high on the ladder, dropped him through the hole down into the dark hut, grabbed the bundle of spears from his hands as he fell. “Now I’ll make light, dear moon, so you can look for my umbrella. You’re lying on your face. I’ll make light.” And sent spear after spear straight down, gathered stones, flung them into the hut. “Some new rays. Just look! Can you see. Not yet, not yet.”

He fetched a straw mat from a neighbour’s house, whispered hoarsely to the people: “The moon is in my hut. You must worship him. Bring umbrellas. His rays are keen.” They ran puzzled from their huts with lanterns and torches. Hubeane beckoned from the doorway: “Bring your umbrella. He’s lying on his face. The moon. He fell from the sky into my hut. When he turns over he’ll burn you.”

And when they thronged into the hut, well used to Hubeane’s antics but still fearful, there lay a man in a big moon-mask, on his face, pierced with spears and pummelled by stones. They untied the bloodstained figure, turned him over. The dead man was Hubeane’s father, his chest speared through, his skull broken. Hubeane stood there dumbly, hung his head howling ranting: “Ah my father.” They seized him: “You killed him, Hubeane.” He showed his teeth, hit out: “It was the moon. It was not my father. If my father was alive he would be my witness. The moon burned him with its rays. It tried to burn me.” The men realised what had happened. Hubeane crouched in a corner, scored his chest: “”What will my mother say. She’ll protect me from the moon.” He raised his fists at them. They did nothing more with him.

SNAKES

TO DRAMAS of this kind, dances, high-spirited fellowship in meadow and wood, big crowds came from the cities. Some never returned home, stayed for days near the theatres and pleasure pavilions, settled there. The town still at their backs, but they moved captivated through the landscapes of day and night, countless twinkling stars gazing down from an indigo sky. They saw earlier settler folk handling the reins on horse carts, oxcarts, driving cows. Fields were a regular patchwork of cleared land from which people made bread. Low land forests lakes meadows, swept always by boisterous winds. Gouts of rain, clouds high in the air.

In the London townzone, during the reconstituted Communal League, a harsh work economy prevailed. New factories needed huge numbers of workers, growing month by month. Around this time ever more people flooded to the periphery and out across the borders. The London Senate ascertained: the workforce is insufficient for the projected facilities. Delvil spoke indignantly: What’s happening now is unprecedented. We feed three quarters of the population. At the very moment we need their energy, just a portion of their energy, they reject us. In this and later debates it came to serious confrontations between Delvil, who had grown sensitive, and stocky White Baker. While they agonised, she took steps to draw the dangerous movements closer to the city, placed her own properties at the disposal of settler groups.

Without consulting or informing the Senate, she had blocked the transport of important ores and salts from her mines, causing difficulties for the Meki-factories. She defended the unemployed, grown slack in long idleness: you can't turn them energetic at a moment's notice. Delvil roared: They're not weak, just pathetic, they lack any sense of what the common good requires.

And as befitted its power and strength, the London Senate – conscious, as it put it, of its duty towards a western humanity faced with new tasks – decided to challenge the whole population to cooperate in the reconstruction of the townzones, fallen into decay through war and general apathy. It was essential to present new members of the Communal League with a clear picture, a compelling example; the townzones in their current state were no model. The disloyal and degenerate should know that the Senate had the means to impose its will. The decision was supported by all senators, including White Baker, appearing at the Senate for the last time.

No one had missed the maverick female; only Delvil was troubled. The senatorial decree was greeted with mockery and anger. Agitators priests settlers thronged into the city, scornfully shredded the decree: "Why does the Senate babble about 'duty to western humanity'? What tasks must western humanity be steered towards? Maybe the laboratories have made new discoveries, and the people will be the guinea pigs. The Urals War was all in vain? Who says! It had one result: ruling clans, senatorial powers, Communal Leagues all revealed their impotence. And they think we've forgotten. They didn't prevail against Marduk, though they had weapons and could have wiped him out. They didn't dare. Could have wiped out and blown away the migrants to Yukon and Alaska. But they left the Yukon and Alaska people alone! Why? Because inwardly they're paralysed. The storm will fall on them with hail and thunder. What can they do but threaten, so as to hide their fear!"

White Baker informed the Senate that she renounced the senatorial rights accruing to her from her properties and ancestry. Rachenila was at her side. The American delegates were still in London. Delvil, uneasy, wanted them to leave. But the foreigners looked on with satisfaction at the difficulties of the Europeans and their notion of a new Communal League. They stayed even as Delvil ignored them. Old Klokwan spoke with New York: London will persuade nobody to their new League; the ruling clans have an opportunity to show their strength; we'll see how it goes.

White Baker, no longer young, seemed broken. In the Senate, the renunciation of her seat and transfer of her properties to strolling players and settlers was seen as a dreamy echo of St Francis. Small proud lithe Rachenila was always with her, prominent cheekbones, fiery dark brown deepset eyes beneath thin black brows, pitch black hair that shimmered red in the light and fell smoothly down her neck. Her earlobes pierced four times, silver rings dangling with feathers, slivers of mother-of-pearl. She liked to paint her round chin red, trace cinnabar-red rings around her eyes. When she went out, over her blue blouse, her jacket of fine tasselled leather, colourful woollen blanket, she wore a wide shawl that she wound now about her waist, now over her shoulders. She accepted none of the jewellery White Baker tried to give her; but once she lifted a chain of pearls from the Englishwoman's throat, asked if she could keep it. When the woman placed it on her with a smile she laughed and threatened: you shouldn't give pearls away, you lose something, they are fossilised water, spirits dwell in them that take something from the wearer. Still White Baker was happy, she liked to see the pearls on Rachenila. The American girl made White Baker a long pleated shirt of white silk, placed around her neck on a leather string a sliver of bone carved into a crow's beak.

White Baker and Rachenila retreated to the Ashdown Forest, south of the zone. A small band of people lived here. Above the left shoe, either over a sock or on the bare ankle, they wore a metal ring shaped like a serpent; from these they called themselves 'Snakes'. They strove to find a balance. When their gaze wandered in helpless amazed delight over hills, newly ploughed fields, trees, when they had tired themselves out with toil, they began to observe themselves, and each other. In the townzone they had clung together listlessly in a state of overexcited external stimulation, hardly male, hardly female. Now they discovered with delight the miracle of maleness, femininity. They slipped from the city to the Ashdown Forest, adopted openly, tenderly and without irony the symbol of the serpent of temptation in Paradise. They had cosy wooden cabins, were under the Snake's protection. Snakes came to these, male and female, naked and clothed, gazed at one another, lay together touching stroking. On piles of leaves or hay, in daylight or darkness, they trembled in the profound confusion that one warm body imparts to another. And as they twined they disappeared, they said it was on a journey or a pilgrimage, from which they returned sighing to their bed of leaves, in the arms of the similarly sighing other. These pilgrimages induced the profoundest mutual reverence among the Snakes; nothing was more holy. Secluded in the silent forest stood the cabins to which couples withdrew when they felt they must embark on the secret journey. When anyone came across them they threw flowers and leaves, welcomed their touch.

White Baker and Rachenila turned up among these Snakes who had cut themselves off from the city. The two women kissed: "How happy I am to have found you, Rachenila. And to find this place."

"Don't you love any man?"

"I don't know. I love you. Your hair your teeth your tongue, everything about you. I must run after you like a happy shy puppy, and am happy when you take me in your arms. You don't realise, Rachenila, how happy I am to see you wear my pearls."

"I see, White Baker, that you have no fear."

"Of what."

The corners of Rachenila's mouth twitched, her dark brown eyes grew lively. She set her shoulders: "I would not say this back in London. Here, with the Snakes, the air is dangerous."

"Yes."

"You say Yes so eagerly, White Baker. See, maybe even I –." White Baker uttered a soft wail, tried to put her arms around the tawny girl's neck, she flinched back "No, Baker. Maybe you have no fear, but I can still be afraid."

White Baker cooed: "You need never be afraid of me."

"Not of you."

"My love, friend of my heart." The tawny girl squeezed her eyes shut, her knees were knocking. Clung breathing hard to the strong white woman's neck, the happy woman who covered her face in kisses, cooed sweet nothings. "Ah, come to the nearest hut, Rachenila."

"I am afraid. I might do something to you."

"My friend, my beloved."

"White Baker, am I that? Your beloved?"

White Baker hugged her passionately. Rachenila let herself enjoy it, even clawed her hands at White Baker's face and throat, eyes closed. Mouth against mouth. These were White Baker's most rapturous and brightest weeks.

The Snakes assigned fields to the two women. Everyone mocked the efforts of the Senate to tempt them back to the city. White Baker was happy. She no longer saw the girl, her stiff bearing, her coolness, her dreamy hostile distant face: she possessed her. The girl groaned inwardly, still went to the white woman, was helplessly tender to her.One day the tawny girl was missing from their hut. She searched for her that evening, found she had run to the female leader of the Snakes. From young pretty blonde Diuva she was horrified to learn: Rachenila had confessed, asked her pardon, she cannot be the slave of another woman. She must be free, or violence might ensue. The pretty leader stroked her visitor's cold hands. The girl had wept, she would return to her compatriots in London.

Such long days White Baker spent in Diuva's hut, longing for Rachenila, daydreaming her face her body, chewing on the crow's beak of bone.

Rachenila returned alone to America. The pretty leader of the Snakes sat with sobbing White Baker. Ah, terrible this power that resides in each of us. It is good to honour and appease it. After some weeks she asked White Baker, calmer now, if she would stay.

"I am truly grateful to you, to the Snakes. I feel, more than when I first came, that I must stay. If you will allow me." She was on her knees, kissed the ground at the leader's feet. "Just to bow before you, hear your sweet words, I wish for nothing more."

But White Baker, who still wore Rachenila's white silk blouse, colourful woollen shawl, did not stay long with the Snakes. She went roaming with a young brown-black man who served as her driver, south and west of the London townzone.

People had already settled way up to the north of the island. Ever more groups, splitting off. Bellicose masses who behaved like Marduk's barbarians; many were flesh-eaters. Groups consisting entirely of women, who toiled in the fields, continued to eat Meki-food and blamed every evil on male domination. They wore a stone as big as a fist around the neck as a symbol of their unfreedom. To the north, very scattered, were Mutes: they renounced all language, only sang as the sun rose, then spent the day in humble silence. They were dirty, washed once a week, avoided strangers.

The townzone leaders issued ever more urgent decrees. Some Fulani gathered at Bedford, on the River Ouse, staged new antics of foolish Hubeane. Then in various districts at the edges of woods, on bare hills, on ploughland, they began their love-games. Dense crowds around them; Snakes making merry, glowering warriors hung with furs, muddy Mutes, sad slack urbanites, anxious people confused by witch-doctors. White Baker was there. The graceful brown people played in masks.

FOURTH SKIT: THE LION AND THE JACKAL

IT WAS the fable of the lion and the wild jackal. A chief's house had a roof of straw. The man sat at the door in ceremonial finery beside a young girl tattooed in red: a pretty thing, his daughter. People round about.

The chief cupped his hand to his mouth: "This is my daughter Mutiyamba. I shall give her hand to the man who is strongest and most handsome. I am rich, no need for a bride-price. Shout it abroad everywhere, on the plains, along the river, in banana groves, on sandy islets: Chief Kassangi will give his daughter Mutiyamba to whoever is strongest and most handsome."

A tender orphaned youth called Liongo loved the girl. He wore a loincloth of grass, couldn't throw a spear. He went with them on the plains, along the river, in the banana groves, on sandy islets to proclaim: Kassangi will give lovely slender Mutiyamba to the strongest and most handsome. He consoled himself, sang quietly:

"The strings of my heart are sounding. Why? I saw a tall gilly-flower; a white ant bit into its root. I must heal the gilly-flower."

The tender lad went ahead of the other drummers. Past rain-ponds, between huge liana-hung jungle trees, past shea-

butter trees where little monkeys leapt, past leather-leafed fig trees, past ravines where black bats and fat wasps swarmed, in dense tall stripy thickets of wild sorghum, by green swamps rife with worms and snails where wild gourds and loofah-melons tangled their vines: poor Liongo sang Mutiyamba's praises to entice the strongest, the most handsome. Sang her body:

"Her breasts are twin swelling onions, no tree blossoms like her garments. Her head her ears her lips her arms are hung with golden ornaments that flash like lightning in a storm. Her eyes are soft and languid. Her legs are slender copper needles. All who look upon her are torn by longing. You must close your eyes as when you stick your head over a steaming pot. And after closing them you have no peace, for the eyes still smart. Whoever looks on Mutiyamba must show his heart is strong. He is thrown in a jail, with only her picture to look at. His heart must be strong to break down the door and throw himself on her mercy. Hundreds will seek her hand! Kassangi is a mighty chief, he has built a strong stockade around his village. Only one with shoulders like a mountain, the hunger of a jackal can penetrate the stockade."

A young tawny lion heard Liongo's song. And as Liongo sang the girl's praises past the bat-ravine, a wild jackal came slinking out. When the chieftain's tender herald returned to the palace, several youths were already there, had undergone tests of their prowess, been rejected by Kassangi. The lion and the jackal followed at husky Liongo's heels. The lion upended the two strongest youths, jumped the tallest part of the stockade with one bound, downed a bucket of palm-wine in one draught and walked just as steadily as before. On him Kassangi bestowed his daughter; the splendid tawny-maned lion sat at her side. Mutiyamba was aghast that this growling monster was now her husband. But she admired his strength.

Next day they celebrated the wedding in Kassangi's great hall. The wild jackal Kri had not dared to show himself to the chieftain, with the tawny lion there. Now he crouched beside the young lion, who was ill at ease among the humans at the table.

"You don't know the local customs, lion," the jackal whispered. "You must bring the porridge over here, if you feel like eating."

The lion padded to the big pot in the middle of the table, carried it over in his mouth. The deprived guests stared in embarrassment. Kassangi the chief pretended not to notice, called for another pot. He ate from it, offered it to his daughter, and the young bridegroom.

Kri stood on his hind legs."You are the bridegroom. You must give presents. You must spoon porridge into every guest's hand, as a memento."

The lion wiped his mouth, stood up, held the big pot to his chest, and started to go around the table, for every guest ladling a spoonful of porridge into his hand or just splashing it on his lap. The first few made no move, the next in line ran for the door, burst out laughing, held their sides as the monster looked sheepishly across at them. Kassangi frowned in anger. He had the guests cleaned up and those outside called back in. The feast resumed in silence. "A foolish lot," whispered Kri as they sat apart. "Best keep away from them, they're jealous."

The wedding procession went through the village. The splendid groom sat beside Mutiyamba on an oxcart decked with ribbons. Trumpets ahead and behind, and drums. They came to Kassangi's house, where the chief was standing with all his wives, waving. The jackal leapt up on the cart from behind, climbed onto the seat between the couple. "Mutiyamba, your groom looks so glum. Stroke me, cuddle me, it'll cheer him up." She put her arms around Kri, kissed him on the muzzle, looked tenderly on him. People giggled, Kassangi was shocked.

In the room the lion took the jackal aside. "What were you up to, letting Mutiyamba kiss you? She has never kissed me."

"Cheer up, lion. Don't scold her. I'll tell you the secret, but you must promise never to reveal it. See, as I was running here I sprained a front paw. She noticed it, Mutiyamba the beautiful. She's so sympathetic, so tender. That's why she stroked and kissed me."

So the young lion limped through the door, limped right limped left. And when he stood before Mutiyamba he had tears in his eyes. "I've twisted my ankles, in both my back legs. Yesterday, when I was leaping in your honour." He looked at her most piteously. She drew her breastcloth over her face, in her shame whispered to her father, swept out followed by her two maids. The men steamed, their noses rumpled, they made mocking faces, spat in the air. The chief offered a jug to the groom.

"Drink, lion. My daughter Mutiyamba, most beauteous of maidens, is now yours. We wish you joy. No bride-price is required. Your legs will recover. But you must give her presents, it's our custom."

The lion took the drink, bowed mutely to the chief, went out. He wandered through the village out onto the plain, Kri behind him. "Lion, why wander so far? And you must limp, or the bride won't pity you. Limp behind me back to the village, at once, so the king can see how humble you are, even though your shoulders are like mountains, as poor Liongo sang."

"What presents should I give, to her and her father Kassangi?"

"That's for you to think about. But don't show that you are rich, or he and the whole village will feel ashamed. Don't bring an antelope, it'll scare them. But why go so far into the plain. Here, deposit your scat. Yes, here. I'll weave a basket of grass, we'll put the scat into it. I'll take the little basket to Kassangi and Mutiyamba. They've seen how strong and handsome you are. They'll know you are humble and have no wish to shame them."

The lion squatted by a hedge in a field of yams, squeezed out his droppings. The jackal dug up yams that looked like human toes. He spread leaves, layered the warm droppings over leaves and yams, smoothed the package, covered it

against flies. Then he wove two little baskets of grass, put the droppings in, strolled to the village. The lion followed limping, head down, now and then uttering a mournful roar.

Growling respectfully, the jackal entered Kassangi's hall. At a sign from him the lion stood by the doorpost, squinting in. Kri handed over the little baskets with an inscrutable solemn expression. Mutiyamba burst into tears, fled from the lion as he drew near to comfort her. The chief hurled the basket down. The lion bowed smiling, crept humbly closer, settled nervously in his befouled seat. Was still sitting there alone after Kassangi and the guests had left.

Outside they debated what to do about the lion, who was so strong and had already been promised the bride. They took up spears, planned to tell him: according to the custom of the village he must undergo another test, and then again three days later, to prove he had no help from a sorcerer. They thought he would lose because of his bad legs. They bombarded the jackal Kri, who was there listening, with curses on his friend's account. He spoke glibly, airily said it would all work out to their satisfaction, assumed a wise enigmatic look. "Wisdom – where is it found? In the eyes? No, in the head. Lord Kassangi knows that now. He didn't before. I, Kri, am but a puny thing, but you need not teach me how to scrabble with my paws."

The men were astonished at his cleverness.

"Why so sad, dear friends? Hope is the pillar of the world. Heaven is built on patience." They should, he advised, abandon their plan. He assured them he would defeat the lion. They shook their heads: "He'll deliver when hens have teeth." But Kassangi shook the most worshipful Kri by the hand.

Next morning when Kri and the lion left their tent, the lion was astonished to see everyone bow reverently to Kri, make way for him, while ignoring him with looks of distaste.

"You see, lion, what is in my power to do, and who I am."

"Kri, how did you fix this? I'm your friend, you won't leave me in the lurch."

The jackal drew him behind the huts. He planted himself there, twitched and jerked his body. The lion was puzzled: "What are you doing?"

"Don't you notice something? Listen now, listen hard."

The lion stepped closer: "I hear nothing, Kri. Nothing at all."

"Listen to my belly. Everyone can hear it. That's why they bow down to me. I've been sweating away all night to make sure they all treat me like a king."

"How did you do it?"

"You still can't hear." The jackal flounced, jumped high. "But you'll hear it soon. Your fearsome roar has made you deaf. I have a bell in my body."

"A bell."

"A tinkling bell. It tinkles with every step. That's why they bow down to me."

"Where did you find the bell, Kri?"

"Kassangi, don't laugh, I stole the bell from Kassangi himself. He doesn't know it yet." Kri tittered, the lion roared merrily. "Now his bell is in my body and he hasn't noticed. I stole three, four from him yesterday. Chief's bells. I still have three. But don't tell. I trust you. Let's move on."

But the lion held Kri back. "Tell me, Kri, could you put a bell in me?" Kri shrugged, looked sullen, shook his head dubiously: the lion wouldn't be able to stand the pain. The lion begged "Oh please," promised high honours, he wouldn't give back the bells lying behind the huts. Kri condescended to do it after they had sworn not to betray each other. He would insert the bell in the lion's body that night. They strutted jauntily through the village.

At noon in their room Kri, already puffed up with certainty of victory, recipient of lovely Mutiyamba's smiles, announced that before nightfall the lion must give him one more proof of his mettle. The lion was ready for anything. And when mats had been spread in the great hall for dinner and they were sat there eating away in their pearls and gold chains, Kri asked Kassangi for a red hot iron poker. The lion, swallowing his fear, had to come close. Barking furiously, Kri swung the poker at his back legs. The lion howled in rage for just a little moment, snapped his jaws at the jackal dashing for the door, then curled up, whimpered through the pain, smiled wanly at Kri as he crept slowly back. The guests, Kassangi and his daughter looked on astonished.

From that moment the lion's face was changed.

Audiences at the performances in Bedford could see it. They were profoundly moved. They could not quite put their finger on the change. The lion was like them. He walked like a zone-dweller, helpless with his big waggly head, snuffling breathless after a few steps. On shaky legs he glanced all around in torment and grief.

And the jackal was no longer Kri. He wore a red cap, gold ribbons hanging over the ears and behind his head: a senator's cap.

The lion lay silent on the mat. They offered him food. His lips hung loose. He looked only at Kri, who was watching him. The tormented lion, smiling again, wolfed down his portion. The guests mockingly offered more. He wanted to slip away to roar out his pain, wanted to drink, his throat was horribly dry, but no one offered to pour from the jug. They amused themselves, ate heartily, paid him no heed. Before they stood up, Kri whispered again with Kassangi. A servant brought the glowing poker. The lion, sitting moodily on his mat, was not looking. Fire seared his front legs. The roars, the rolling thunderclaps emerging from his jaws emptied the hall in a flash. He tried to jump. Could not. Then he remembered that this was the test Kri had spoken of. He bit his tongue, squinted about, limped to the door, collapsed. The guests kept their distance. Kri slunk up beside him, heard his friend's groans, the whispers: "Kri, Kri! Don't be angry.

Come closer. I wasn't ready. It was so sudden. I wouldn't have roared otherwise. I wouldn't – you can depend on it! Kri, believe me!"

By this point in the performance, the audience would be in a rage. "Believe me, Kri – dog, dog." Made threatening gestures, eyes blazed, some were in tears.

Kri acted magnanimous. The guests at the door saw how the lion gently rubbed his head against the wretched grey jackal. Their fear receded, they began to titter again. The lion took no notice, thought of the coming night and the bells. Bells tinkled continually in the final scene. But among the guests who filed slowly in behind Kassangi and Mutiyamba, greeted humbly by the apologetic lion, only one did not laugh: tender poor Liongo. He thought: "My mood is sad. The strings of my heart are sounding. Why? I saw the proud gilly-flower. A white ant bit its root, the proud flower will die soon."

When evening came and the guests were feasting with impudent Kri, Liongi slipped into the lion's dark room, bowed. The lion in his melancholy solitude greeted him with joy. He recognised the young herald who had spread word of Mutiyamba's beauty far and wide across the plains to people animals trees lakes. He shook his hand. The boy said: he'd only told him a little bit about Kassangi's daughter; he was on his side. Liongo stroked the lion's mane: was he unwell. He brought two jugs of cool water; the lion stuck his paws in, grunted with relief.

"They treat you badly, lion."

"Oh." He shook his head, said nothing, recalled his promise. For all Liongo tried, the lion would not open up. He showed his gratitude in smiles and words. He would never forget how Liongo had praised the bride's beauty. Made enigmatic allusions to the coming night. So Liongo dared to broach Kri's true character, whispered: what might Kri be up to at this moment, sitting with lovely Mutiyamba, stroking her, that sly dirty hound who snuffles around in ravines with bats wasps jackals. The lion gave a non-committal grunt, furrowed his brow, looked askance at Liongo. Who did not waver, spoke of scoundrels. The pensive lion: I know what I see with my own eyes; I know I'm not clever, but Kri is my friend. Liongo asked bitterly: would the lion let himself die if Kri ordered it. He'd already burned him, already lamed him.

"Tests, tests," murmured the lion.

"What is he testing, lion?"

"That which will bring me joy and honour."

"He'll kill you. He wants Mutiyamba. It wasn't for him I sang."

"Oh my bride," the lion basked in her glow, "I'd do anything for her."

"He will murder you."

"Give me water. You'll speak differently tomorrow."

Liongo, weeping, left him to the darkness. The lion waited eagerly for the jackal to come. Darkness. It lightened. The lion turned. It was Kri with a torch. Whispering from the doorway without entering: "Lion! Hey! How's it going, lion?"

"Well, Kri. I've been waiting. Won't you come in."

"I'm coming. Where are the bells?"

The jackal stumbled, he had been carousing all evening with the chief and the guests. Trilled: "There they are. Lovely bells. Wonderful. It'll all go smoothly. What say you, lion? Paws still sore?"

"Not much."

Kri gave a shrill yelp. "You see how that went. Wonderful. Here's the poker, on your feet, hup one, hup two, hup three!" Kri patted his shoulders, belched. "Hold still, my little son. Fine sturdy son. We'll do the job." And he sang: "Mutiyamba, Mutiyamba, no tree blossoms like your garments. Whoever sees you, Mutiyamba, has to close his eyes in longing, as if scalded by steam from a pot."

"Why are you singing about my bride."

"Her legs are like slender copper needles. Come dear friends, one and all." He fussed about in the room, laid out ropes. The lion watched uneasily.

People tripped through the door, stood along the walls. "Why are they here."

"They're my friends, all of them. We've been feasting together all day long. Feasting spitting puking. A wonderful afternoon. Hey, wasn't it a wonderful afternoon?"

"And evening."

"And now tonight. You'll be astonished what Kri can do. Hey, lion, sit up now."

"Why do you speak so roughly to me?"

"Now the thickhead wants to tell me how to talk." The lion held his breath, gave a roar. The jackal staggered to the door, the people huddled together.

"Thickhead? I, a thickhead?"

Kri tucked in his tail, summoned his courage, lurched closer: "Lion, we understand each other." He tried to gather his wits, snarled: "Let's start. Enough of guzzling and nattering. You want this, lion."

The lion looked long at him: "Yes." The jackal, nastily: "Well then."

The guests carried wooden pegs into the hut, pounded them into the floor. The lion shuddered, his lips went slack. "What are they doing?"

Kri, aping: "What are they doing? What are they doing? Bring sticks. Bring the bells. Quick about it."

The lion pulled his paws from the jugs that Liongo had brought, crept closer. Kri snuffled at the jugs. "Who brought

these?"

"Liongo."

"Ah, Liongo. Him. That tender lad. That scoundrel."

Again the lion held his breath, let out a dreadful roar. The room emptied. Kri at the door trembled in fear, almost fainting. Shame and rage held him there. He crept forward timidly, pleading ingratiating: "Now these are pegs for your little paws, these are ropes to hold your legs. Come everyone, the lion knows you'll keep quiet. He'll have such a bell in his tummy, just like mine, tinkle tinkle when he walks. You'll all bow down before him. And Mutiyamba – oh!"

Torches blazed in the room. The people eager, lascivious. The lion stood between the pegs, lowered his huge maned head. He thought of Mutiyamba. This sly unpleasant Kri would make it so that she would kiss him. She'd kissed Kri in the cart, on the muzzle. Head turned aside, the lion wept into the darkness. Where was Liongo? He drew the jackal's ear towards him. "Don't hurt me too much." The jackal gave an evil grin, patted and stroked him.

They bound the lion's legs with ropes. He lay on his side, rolled onto his back. They grabbed his forelegs and hind legs, stretched them roughly apart. He growled, writhed in fear. The guests gurgled with joy when they saw the young lion's white naked belly exposed. Waves of fear swept through him. They threw back their drunken heads, staggered around the helpless beast. Their mocking laughter was so loud that Kassangi and Mutiyamba appeared outside and stuck their heads through the window. Kri was jumping around, sharpening a knife. The lion, hearing the scrape of stone on steel, grew wild with terror. "What's happening now? Kri, what are you up to? What now?"

"Do you feel anything?" – "No."

"And now?" – "No."

"Now?" – "No. What are you doing?" The knife was sharp enough. He leapt on the lion's chest, growled: "Now. Courage now, lion." And he plunged the blade into the body, sliced thrust twisted. Hot bright blood spurted into his face, blinded him, made him splutter. The lion writhed under him, strained left and right. Liongo at the lion's head: "Up, lion! They're killing you! Lion, he's killing you!"

"He's killing me. Yes, it's true," rushed through the lion's brain. He heaved around, broke free of the pegs, skin stripping from his paws. Marrow-curdling howls of pain. Attack Kri! Tear Kri to pieces! He must attack Kri. He roared into the gaggle of guests, pegs and ropes whirling, beat squashed cracked tore bit. Was Kri gone already. The lane was pitch dark. Kill, kill. Kassangi, Kassangi, there, running away. Crunch! his back, crunch! his neck; his life was over. How the audience cheered and wept! Away now, lion, out of the village, into the plain, the broad green plain.

His rolling endless roaring. He leaped panting at the stockade, could not jump over. What's this flowing hot from his body, what's holding him back, what's dragging between his legs. Hurts. Oh. He trod on it. Pain, dreadful agony silenced his roar. It was his own entrails. Made another fearsome leap. Horrible roar, cut short. He was impaled on the stakes. Groaned writhing twisting there. His eyes rolled; they were blind. Spears thrust from below. He had no more blood. The audience wept at the sight of the splendid young lion, its limp dying body high on the pointed stakes of the stockade. They threw stones when the funeral of the sacrificial beast took place. Kassangi was dead. The jackal was dragged by the tail through the village. They'd stuffed mule-dung in its mouth, the red senatorial bonnet with the gold ribbons was tied to its muzzle. Mutiyamba, weeping: she's taken off all her jewels. She stepped from her house. The new chief had thrown her out. She tried to kiss Liongo's feet, begged for help. He took her to his hut, out to his field. The chief's daughter never stopped crying. He sang:

"First you were poison, now I can eat you. First you scalded my eyes, now I can see you. You stopped me from sleeping, now I sleep beside you. I rock like a boat, Mutiyamba, you hold me steady. There are no bracelets on your arms, no necklaces at your breast, no earrings. My mouth for your ear, my mouth for your breast, my mouth for your arms."

IN BRUSSELS

BY THE River Ouse they played sweet scenes of parting and reunion, the old fable of Melise of Bordeaux and her girlfriend Betise. White Baker absorbed the fable in sorrow and delight. She covered her eyes. She said aloud: this is life.

The Senate powerless as the townzone emptied. The first cases occurred of settlers entering the zone, factories mysteriously burning. Delvil, watched by the American delegates, sent for White Baker. She replied that the vehicle had not yet been built that could bring her back. She enticed town-dwellers out to the countryside, pulled all the splinter groups together for organised resistance. Delvil, in despair, mocked her in the Senate: "A female Marduk!" They were stumped, on the defensive.

Pouring out of American townzones, hordes of people headed for Canada and Labrador, led by strong men and women. In Labrador they created a land empire around Ungava Bay.

People poured out of New York Quebec Ohio. A curious urge sent them all north, leaving the Great Lakes behind to

head up east of Hudson's Bay. This movement on the North American continent was quite orderly, there were no fanatical figures like Marke and Marduk. Zimbo had emerged in the centre of Europe: the Bohemian townzones, Nuremberg and Frankfurt in Germany sent him their unleashed masses.

The great senates did nothing. As these events unfolded, Klokwan's delegation quietly left London, no longer smiling. In London Glasgow Newcastle, on the continent in Toulouse Nantes Lyon, which had remained calm, streets were empty, flowers sat frostbitten unwatered in greenhouses, transparent mall-canopies collapsed, once again plazas were swept by rain and wind. Planes and cars stood waiting, as if an enemy was on the march. A paralysis spread across the western zones; impossible to tell where it would lead. It affected the senates. Their shock grew to horror when black Zimbo, unarmed, appeared with a crude rabble in the Hamburg-Bremen zone and calmly proceeded to the coast, drove away senates, destroyed warehouses and facilities. He menaced the English Channel. The population of the dense coastal zone along to the Zuider Zee was forced down to Westphalia, the Rhineland.

The Belgian Senate met in Brussels. This townzone would not crumble. The weakened famine-stricken hordes being shaken out across the land were in their eyes merely wilful yearning migrants – even as they collapsed onto frozen ground, and epidemics raged. Smiling senators called to England. Gloomy Londoners came away from the whirlwind their land had become, stood cowed in the gleaming Council House of the Belgians. Here aeroplanes zipped through the air; cheerful loud unthinking bustle in the wintry Brussels streets. Delvil's pale lip curled as he looked down with Ten Keir from the overheated room. He squeezed the broad-shouldered Belgian's arm: "What does the world look like here! Even now!"

"Even now, and for a long time to come!"

"That's what White Baker said, not so many years ago: Marduk must be defeated, the Marchers smoked out. Where is White Baker now?"

"Wash your dirty linen at home, Delvil."

"Am I passive? It's no weakness in these times to be passive. When I see your buildings and these crowds of people, I see them and – already don't see them."

Ten Keir pulled away, stared from his bony face at the sighing Londoner, left him at the window. The Belgians, twenty men and women from newly-risen clans and various ethnicities, ignored the English.

They seized some of the refugees and settlers straggling through from Hamburg, half-starved ragged people, dumped them in front of Delvil's group. Ten Keir laughed:

"Your ideal, my dear guests. How do you like them? Would a plane trip along the coast, over Holland be to your liking? You'll see something very old and very new. War of all against all. The game has started up again: people relish it like a new discovery. What are misery death hunger for? Surely not just for stories fables theatrical performances. Come now to Life! Poet, poet! You only live once, so live it to the full. If you don't freeze off your ten toes, you don't know what Life is. If you wake up of a morning in your car – but you're not in your car, someone stole it in the night, you're lying between the wheel-tracks in the mud, head a bit bumped and dozy, a bit of a skull fracture – you understand nothing of Existence. Have never penetrated to the fullness of Existence. Stand at the door, a beggar: coo-ee!" He pointed with both hands to the migrants, his blue and white sleeves slipped back to the shoulder.

"Behold these dwellers in Paradise! A reopened reconquered Paradise! Blessed are we who see them! The god of our ancestors has let himself go soft. With one exception: he's taken up these types again. Now: how goes it with you, ladies, gentlemen? What does this god look like after all this time, is he well, does he thunder in sympathy, has he gathered you in his arms? Was it on the whole a happy reunion? Groaning table, nice warm bed? What do our English friends have to say, you Delvil, to our dwellers in Paradise? It's delightful that they've made their way here, can spend a little time with us, favour us with their company. They felt sympathy for us, wanted to tell us a story. But I can reveal it all, no word from them is necessary. Such secrets! Such ethereal beauty of face and form, look at them, that mother-of-pearl sheen of the skin at hands, feet, face. They've applied a thick layer of dirt, so the sight won't cause us pain. Such delicate feelings. Dirt as makeup. You think they're dressed in rags? Delvil, rags? Dwellers in Paradise, in rags! Haha! You think they look like skeletons, like people who for weeks have dined on nothing but stubble from the fields and bark from trees, drunk only river water. See, they nod, our guests from Paradise. Oh, such delicacy! Such excess of sensitivity! Why so modest. We are strong men and women, we can take a blow. You come from Paradise, you've abandoned our wretched towns where we govern you to death with food, drink, with outdated horrors like eating and drinking, oppress you with leisure all week long. You've gone to Paradise, to the living ineradicable god, away from the good-for-nothingness of this urban existence with its colours and lights and goods and aeroplanes and games and sauces, a hundred different foods and wines, all the loathsome instruments of torture you once clung to from morn till night. And it never ends. Unbearable suffering, intolerable suffering. Paradise appeared, streets were burned away, men flew in the air, set off fireworks to greet this marvellous advent, worthy of the Bible. You embraced it, this Paradise! Found everything as Adam left it. You took over the whole caboodle. We saw you sobbing with emotion at this advent, your eyes are still red. How you greeted the rain, the wet, endless wet from the sky, reminiscent of the Flood, falling from a sky that's real not painted. Wetness falling, the real stuff, more, always more. You realised in bliss that mankind comes from water, and you trembled! You wanted never to leave the water, you happy swimming splashing creatures. You chewed on grass and stalks. How did they taste. At last, at last, food directly to the hand from the earth that engenders everything. The eternal Primal Mother! Forever and ever! Woe to anyone who forgets it. And then yet more was granted you. You fell sick, you had the blessing of disease. The benevolence of fever, the grace of pain; and the insomnia. What delights! No person, no master, no

factory could supply you with such fullness and abundance. You felt the blessing: I can't sleep, I shiver with fever, pain shatters my head, my chin, my bones. How good: there's no one to help me, I stand on my own two feet, I am a human, in Paradise, at Nature's breast. And I, Ten Keir, the criminal: what do I do? I have you seized and brought here! I do beg your pardon, dear friends. We had such longing for you! We'll soon release you to your magic realm. Think of us poor people, healthy, strong, plenty to eat and drink, our warm clothes. Of us, who must suffer all that."

Madam Atorai, plump and calm in red satins, nodded amid the laughter: "Our crimes are truly dreadful."

Tireless Ten Keir spouted some more: "God punishes us with milk and honey. Modes of punishment have changed over the centuries. Fire and brimstone brought no improvement to humanity, so now God's trying this way."

Madam Atorai, still serious: "And God is right. We are improving. But not yet enough. The cure must be applied more intensively. I fear he won't recoil from us before matters come to the extreme."

"What do you mean, Atorai?"

She rolled her eyes, made a moue: "What I would like – what I'd like – is for everyone to be male or female according to their own whim."

They burst out laughing. "It'll come!" – "I hear bells pealing already!" And Madam Atorai still grave amid the laughter, pouting: "Bells! I'd go willingly into that church. I'm such a sinner."

The Belgians' good humour evaporated when later the quiet Londoner Pember spoke. These people, the fat man said, should not be merely the butt of jokes. You need to see through their skin, their heads, their bodies. Their ruinous condition results not just from their brief miserable time as refugees.

"Well," Ten Keir challenged him. Pember shook his head: "You should not be so brash and self-confident. In London we've seen it closer up than you. Not of our choosing, they pushed their way in to us. You should have seen and heard what happened on the River Ouse. Distress I can't describe. Ask if the people had a right to be distressed."

"And?"

"That's all. How can we bring an end to their misery?"

Ten Keir stretched out his arms, pulled back his shoulders with a scornful laugh: "That's why we're here, to discuss the misery of the populace. We'll invite them to perform lyrical poems for us, with lute accompaniment and chorus. That's why we're gathered here. And our towns, what we do here with our townzones, is all rubbish! What? Nothing! Nothing!"

Delvil and Pember kept silent in presence of the unshakable Belgian. Even the American delegates who had followed the Englishmen from London kept quiet. They endured barbed words from the Brussels group, outbreaks of rage as Ten Keir lost his composure; he was a horse hitched to a team, but no longer wanted to pull. His rage against the people fleeing the towns. Every day he told the two delegations to go back where they belonged. The foreigners trembled when they faced a meeting with him.

They were taken through the streets of Brussels. To the north, buildings parks woodland up to the banks of the Scheldt that separated off ancient Antwerp; the Scheldt which was Brussels' western boundary at Oudenaarde. Nivelles and Soignies the southern outskirts of the zone. They were not far from Mons. The foreigners half reluctantly allowed themselves to be guided around the splendid region; their hearts went out to the Belgians. They were carried in chairs for hours through huge canopied malls, selected harmless people nearby, armed guards following behind. So solid was the Belgian regime that they could have stepped from shoulder to shoulder in complete safety. The townzone had few fields or meadows, degenerates and the feeble were swiftly removed; immigrants streamed in. Everywhere in the malls were amusing attractive products, intoxicating displays. Everything displayed was available to anyone willing to submit to the ruling elite. Apart from the laws, all that was required was obedience to random work assignments and long periods of idleness. Thus did the zones maintain their health, give forth their fruits in tropical abundance.

The senatorial visitors as they passed through paid little heed to those who shrank back from them. Clever nimble young people kept close to them, Boosters of both genders, discoverers of needs, creatures who themselves aimed to become rulers. Light-sources carpets clothing, drinks to stimulate or send to sleep, food-blends and food novelties of the Meki-factories, bathwater with stimulating energising soporific effects, implements for stroking puffing at brow cheeks breast arms. The cold eyes of the ruling men and women studied these things. People were captivated, could hardly pull themselves away, seemed spellbound. Ten Keir's exuberant pride in the presence of Delvil and Pember; his expression said: such splendours, such delights for the people. Delvil thought: what was it they screamed, when they torched the malls in the west of London? Away with these castles, these fortresses of the rulers! That's what Mutes Warriors Snakes had cried.

The evening after this trip they stopped at an underground vault near a development facility for the synthetic food factories. Both practical and theoretical work was done here. Several senators were in the party; they greeted the toiling silent surprised men and women who had been taken up once they showed themselves sufficiently knowledgeable strong and proud. On the walls were magical round specks of light surrounded by black blinds, eyes of bright light that could be shrunk shifted moved around closed. Crystals were studied here. Black tables were thick with mineral dust. Huge boards covered in strange symbols arrows numbers hung from the ceiling. They hurried by, past low doorways leading to deeper cellars and on to closed-off chambers completely isolated from the surface, from celestial light and heat.

Ten Keir stopped at a numbered door. They took a lift down. "No one needs to know," declared Ten Keir, now very subdued in the completely empty space. Along the walls were a number of unopened flat tall cases. "No one needs to hear what we discuss. Perhaps our English and American friends would like to say something?" They huddled in the

space, its darkness pierced by a light-clump that seemed to emerge from a hole in the wall, a globular scattering of rays from a light-field. Since no one spoke, Ten Keir, standing in the dark beside one of the light-specks, continued. “I repeat what I said earlier: we shall not willingly abdicate. They’ll have to compel us. I’d like to see how they’ll manage it.”

Delvil: “No one will force you or any of us.”

“So here we’ll stay.”

Delvil sighed, his shoulders drooped. “That won’t do. We’re making no progress.”

“We are making progress. Watch us, and you’ll make progress.”

Delvil looked around him, pleading: “Won’t anyone speak up. And won’t anyone – excuse me, Ten Keir – won’t anyone take Ten Keir’s place.”

“No one need speak for me. The others share my views.”

“But we are no further forward.”

Ten Keir shouted, waved his arms: “Delvil, you’re beyond help. Where do you stand actually? Are you already half with these Paradise brethren? Where’s your heart?”

“Control yourself, Ten Keir,” Madam Atorai advised.

“Why should I? I mean it. Delvil’s hopeless. He gnaws away, knows not what he wants. He’s helpless. It’s a crime to be helpless in times like this, Delvil. You should do what White Baker did.”

Delvil, hoarse: “I don’t need your advice. Leave me out of your game.”

“No one here present can be left out of the game.”

Delvil, hoarse: “I want you to leave me out of your game.”

“Ah, your hackles are rising. Good, that’s how you’ll come to your senses. I think the same holds for the Paradise brethren. Then they’ll defend themselves and we’ll see who’s stronger.”

“Who’s stronger. Who’s stronger. Nothing is achieved just by being stronger.”

“The other side swept away. That’s what’s achieved!”

“No. Nothing is achieved.”

Ten Keir stepped up to Delvil: “What are you after here, actually? Are you a spy?”

“Back off, Ten Keir. I am armed, like you. You won’t harm me.”

“You are in my house.” Pember’s black squat body came between them. As if nothing had happened he drawled, soothing: “We all agree on the nature of the problem. Shall we discuss our respective positions.”

Delvil raised a hand: “It’s all right, Pember, I’m calm. We are not all agreed on the nature of the problem. We are not.” The stocky man stepped back in astonishment, looked from one to the other. Ten Keir triumphant: “So let him speak.” Pember: “Yes. Do you want the Snakes and Mutes and whatever the others call themselves?”

Madam Atorai, slim and thoughtful by the wall, smiled. “He wants the Snakes.”

Delvil’s face fell: “You can’t know that. None of you can know that. Oh.” He sobbed.

Ten Keir turned grimly back to the light-speck, growled: “Look at him. He’s gone.” Madam Atorai smiling, unconcerned: “Let him cry.”

Someone moved close to Ten Keir, to the side of the light source, adjusted the iris. De Barros, one of the first heat researchers to be recruited by the Senate, small pug nose, thick lips, dark skin. He spoke in a hard voice with no eye contact: “I can see what Delvil wants. The things that cause him doubt cause me no doubt at all. The trip through the zone was supposed to show him what it is we’re defending. It didn’t work. But we won’t give up. Two thousand years ago the Huns came and swept everything away. There was great misery, and everything began again from the beginning. We don’t relish that. Why not? We don’t want to.”

“Plain speaking, De Barros,” smiled Madam Atorai. Pember fussed around Delvil, who was on his knees: “We should adjourn the discussion.”

Early next morning Delvil sought out Ten Keir. De Barros was already there. Both men grim. Delvil offered his hand to Ten Keir: “I am in your house, unarmed.”

“Sit.” Ten Keir paced about, planted himself before Delvil, pressed hands to his forehead as if praying. “So, we should surrender? Surrender. You know, I’m half inclined to exchange roles with you.” Stomped growling to the window with a harsh laugh: “I’m glad you came. Did you find out what the Americans think? Their silence was so expressive. They’ve gone.”

Delvil started: “Ah.”

“Why groan? You should rejoice. You wanted a new Communal League. Run after them. I saw through them at once. They’re ready for it.”

“For what.”

“For abdication. Surrender. They’re scared stiff of your White Baker. They are not fit to be rulers. Not even servants. They are dogs. De Barros, I’m ashamed.”

De Barros stood up agitated: “I too. They didn’t deserve to sit at our table. It seems only a few deserve to. Those few should have the courage to clean the slate. And clarify their stance.”

Ten Keir mocked: “Great times, a puny generation. No, De Barros, we are not puny. De Barros is not puny, nor is Madam Atorai. I won’t throw a millennium of thought away for – grass. We can grit our teeth and fight. I too can die.”

“There will be fighting.”

“De Barros, we stand firm. They’ll try to undermine us. We won’t let it come to that.” Delvil, head in hands: “What

will you do?"

"Another Urals War, Mister Delvil!" He shook him: "Eyes up, Delvil. There's no other way."

Delvil and Pember made many visits to Belgian research establishments. At De Barros' side they observed the brigades of strong men and women. It often seemed to Delvil that he was in a dream, danger looming. How far away White Baker was, how unfathomable, distasteful, the Snakes, warriors, barbarians, Marduks, Zimbos. Perhaps it was only right to crush them. But these teeming canopied streets were already astir. So many temples and witch-doctors. Refugees and strays already pushing in.

The Belgian Senate quietly sent out word that it was seeking to link up with reliable townzones wherever they might be, to swat aside feeble senates on the Continent and later in America, even occupy the African coast. Well-armed and trusted agents stirred up French Spanish Italian German zones. In some zones there was talk of revolution, ruling elites overthrown, new senatorial clans arising, protected by Belgium. Meki-factories were expanded in Brussels Antwerp Mons, weapons perfected, stockpiled in great numbers. There were moments when Delvil and Pember, flying constantly back and forth to Brussels, breathed a sigh of relief. Then the Belgians spoke frankly to the Londoners. Ten Keir's intention was nothing less than to annex London. With the backing of the Belgian Senate, he demanded from Delvil a clear statement of measures to be taken against the threatened downfall of British townzones, and for the cleansing of the British Isles. London had long expected this. They could not prevent the transfer of experienced work units from Belgium and Holland, sent to build new factories and produce weapons.

Time passed. Delvil was determined not to fall like White Baker, who had turned up in London and admonished him to resign his post, stop resisting the wheel of fate. The woman, now very gaunt, still wore white, with a thick woollen shawl over her shoulders like Rachenila; the crow's beak of bone still hung at her throat. She spoke gently to Delvil with unwonted tenderness, held his hand. He felt confused and unsettled by the soft persuasive voice, the silences of this proud woman, once so strong, who had called for war against Marduk. He realised sadly: she has no idea what's at stake, has no memory of it. She really should see the strong determined Belgians and their works.

Soon people in the west and north of the English zones knew what was going on. They made contact with the imported workers. Such fear among the Settlers. Only warlike groups were pleased to hear what the Senate was preparing; London was ripe, digging its own grave. They sang the fate of Hamburg Hannover, the subtle failed plan of Zimbo who had become Consul in Berlin. Incendiaries slipped among the buildings. The Belgian migrants had never seen such crude cunning people. They were caught in a silent war that grew worse by the week.

DELVIL'S NOTION

THE PACIFIST Snakes had a fable that they carried around with them.

Once there was a far-off land of many fruitful forests, lying peacefully under a warm sky. The people were like sunbeams – now radiant, now in shadow. A big gentle creature lived in this land. It was covered in thick black fur, lounged idly in its den: a bear. Then raging monsters came into the land, brought wagons guns devices with them. The monsters beat the gentle bear with clubs and axes. His fur was so thick he didn't even growl. They stabbed and pinched him with hot tongs; he shook himself and stood up. When they made the den collapse around the bear, he set off on his travels. Ambled away. He came to a big roaring sea. The furious pursuers couldn't follow. The bear was almost blind, he sniffed the keen salty air, jumped into the water, swam. Swam until he reached a cliff and found himself on an island.

As he lay in a cleft, the rocks above began to shake. Boulders tumbled into the cleft. The bear climbed, crawled about, ducked, had no idea what was what. The foreign monsters had bribed ants to dig away sand from the mountain, undermine the cliff. A young weasel slipped through the rubble, ran in front of the bear. The bear caught the creature's swishing tail between his lips, the weasel crawled to the sea, climbed onto the bear's back to steer. The bear swam and swam. The weasel saw some trees, another island appeared. They pushed through seaweed to the muddy shore. In the evening steam rose around them, the earth grew warm, hot air blew down on them stronger and stronger by the hour. The weasel twitched, jumped squeaking around the big black bear, who snapped and huffed and groaned, hardly able to move. The monsters had climbed into the sky with ladders and hooks and conquered the mighty sun, forced it to heat up the island. It was melting away, the bear was sitting in a fiery soup.

His mouth was dry, he bit at air, stood tall. His fur was burning. He jumped out of the hollow and ran. Where was water, water. The weasel was not with him, the bear couldn't save it, had flung it from his back into the flames. He pushed on roaring, turned around, stood on his hind legs in pain. The heat assailed him. A cool wind came. There's the wind. The great big bear plunged off the cliff into the sea. Whimpered as he fell, had had enough of swimming, wanted to sink to the bottom of the sea and drown. A green water spirit bobbed up when the bear hit the water. It splashed his fur. At once the pain faded. The water spirit sang out:

"I'll show you where to swim to. You can find the way by yourself. You must swim to the north, to where it's icy

cold, there's no sand and nothing grows. Where the sun doesn't shine and it's always night. That's where you must swim to."

The bear grunted. He was tired and lame. He lay on the water, let it carry him. His thick black fur grew again as the waves carried him, week after week. The world was dim to his half-blind eyes. Sometimes now he sensed a little brightness. He swam towards it. The brightness came from endless white ice. He climbed out of the sea, shook himself. Trotted head down across the ice, to a grotto that had just formed in the ice. He crawled in, lay down. It was very cosy. No footsteps followed him over the ice. When he felt hungry he made a hole in the ice, pulled fish from the sea.

Settlers carried the fable around with them. It was probably connected with the celebrated exodus of refugees from the American townzones to Labrador, to frigid Hudson's Bay. They wanted to be quit of the zones. Warriors attacked London; other Settlers tried to stop them. Fears grew of a disastrous emptying of the city. Delvil meanwhile, embittered and despairing, wandered about the Chiltern Hills. There was a general yearning, a fear-driven desire for something distant, unknown. These people were solemn, gentle, many sick or disfigured, silent workers, cheery beggars.

One noontime, as Delvil was leaving snowy Bedford to head back to London, a white cat ran across his path in the sunlight. Ran up and down the path in the dazzling light, licked its fur. It must be a stray. Often it vanished, came running loping back to him. It purred, licked itself at his feet. Something stirred in him. His eyes widened. He shivered. People must be led away to where they can find peace. Must be taken to safety far away. It came to him in a flash. The cat lounged on his boot. He stood, hesitantly bent down to stroke it. It arched its back, kept still. He straightened cautiously, it ran off. He followed it. People must be led to safety, far away.

He said this out loud in London, and was not understood. Why play with stupid humanitarian notions in these dangerous times. Only fat Pember paid attention. In Brussels they heard him out more calmly. The towns can be liberated from these "renewers". We can create a drainage basin for the zones, a drainage basin far far away, a land suitable for deportations. Delvil was adamant; he had overcome his crisis in Bedford. He showed the Belgians: the townzones demand movement, revival. Not to speak of quelling the unrest that menaces them. Now they can make their power manifest. Not like in the Urals War. This land, far enough away from the western zones to leave Settlers to their own devices, leave them in peace, should be created by the zones themselves. It must be a cradle for new energetic races of humanity.

So where then? they wondered in Brussels. Delvil: you can't lead them where they won't go. You must prepare their minds. There's a fable they have. Oh, the "swimming bear"; senators smirked. They yearn for the North, are pulled to the North: we must create a great land for them there.

The Belgians were astonished. It was an experiment he was proposing. A curious plan, but not bad.

And the lanky man drew more into his net. He spoke first of Russia: hand it to the Settlers. Then his imagination blossomed, and everyone who heard him, experts in geography, chin in hand, grew excited. He pointed to a high-latitude part of the Pacific Ocean west of the Americas: here they must reclaim land from the sea, create a new continent. The zones will fling their surplus people, their unfit onto it. The Belgians were fascinated. A continent, a whole new land, reclaimed from the sea. What a plan. It made such an impact that the dazzled Brussels people, as they discussed it among themselves, called in colleagues from other continental zones. Set out for them the implications of this colossal undertaking. They too were astonished excited dazzled.

The incredible rumour, spread by Brussels, reached Settlers on the Continent and in the British Isles. They were horrified. This is the attack; this is how the senates intend to secure their peace. But then they realised: Settlers will be spared, will be safe from their weapons. Extermination had been on the cards: now the zones think of emigration. The cruel senates were thinking the renewers' own thoughts; they were yielding, weakening.

Even before details were known, attacks on outlying parts of London abated. The great townzones lay spellbound. Arms production, new building activity, restoration of old factories all slowed. A wait for something new, mysterious. Everyone was tense.

An unusual to and fro began between the peaceful centres of the zones and outlying settlements. People talked, asked questions. Nomadic migrants were on edge, paying attention. The dreamy fable the Snakes told, of the bear in its distant cave of ice, crossed the Channel to the Continent. Senates pondered. They felt they had found a happy, indeed a marvellous solution. It would be a turning point. The post-Urals syndrome would be at an end.

Details of the new plan were still vague. One day, at a discussion in London, the word Greenland was uttered, and immediately grabbed the soul. A veil had lifted. The magical land. Who it was who spoke the word was soon forgotten. Delvil seized the moment, was the first to wave the banner. From that moment near Bedford when the white stray cat had played about him and redeemed him, he was the most adamant of all. He spoke to groups in his Senate who were eager for action: now we know what we're aiming for; let's check it out. It'll need a long run-up. The goal is there, for senates and for the foes of the townzones. The ball has hit the ground, let it bounce. The Communal League will have a new foundation. The glamour of a heroic task will unite them. The zones will create a new continent, on Greenland. All will see what a reinvigorated human spirit can achieve. Its original glory, now buried encrusted in the zones, will be restored. Never has there been greater need to restore it. What is about to happen will echo down the millennia. Humanity has been embroiled in strife ever since the Urals War. Its abilities have not atrophied, he was sure of it, merely lain dormant. Jaws will drop in amazement, as never before.

And peace poured down on the Settlers. A few discordant warning mocking tones: these were suppressed. Warriors laughed: there's enough land already.

White Baker came to Delvil in London; she was agitated, grabbed him by the shoulder: "What do you think you're

doing? Draining the sea, smashing glaciers? Who's forcing you to it? Not us! We're not forcing you, Delvil, admit it!"

"It's for your own good."

She shook her fists. "Say it's not. By heavens, by the Earth, Delvil, this is terrible. Leave the Earth in peace. Just look at what you – I too – have done already to people. What they look like, how they decay. How you are decaying. What you did in the war in Russia."

"This is different."

"It's no different, Delvil. It's horrible, ghastly, what you're planning. Don't do it, talk them out of it. It's not for us."

Delvil, face dark: "There's no other way. You know nothing, White Baker. The only choice is: hand over to you lot, or the new plan."

"Go at it, then. Kill everyone. You think you'll save yourselves?"

"Ourselves?"

"Yes, what you're planning is for the benefit of you lot alone. You're just using us. We simply don't want you. Don't need you. And it won't help you."

Delvil retreated, murmuring, eyes downcast. "I expected another tone from you."

"You should kill us. Attack Zimbo and Alaska. It's within your power."

"Quiet, White Baker."

"You're pathetic. You want to bury yourselves under ten thousand pyramids. If only the townzones were gone."

Delvil, softly: "Leave. Leave."

Berlin and northern Germany were ruled by Zimbo with an iron hand. There had never been fear in these parts. The extensive zone was filled with robust people, Meki-meals were a distant memory. It was with puzzled contempt that they heard the dreams of the British Settlers, their yearning for a distant Paradise, listened to the curious fable. They saw foreign power-hungry senates flexing their muscles. They pricked up their ears, warned the masses in the British Isles, advised them to make war. Undetected by London, Zimbo, seething with anger, came in spring to Bedford, met White Baker and Diuva, leader of the Snakes. He had looked for men; was directed to these women. He growled, but had to talk with them. White Baker wept at the meeting, but was not prepared for anything. She pointed to the dreadful strength and proven resolve of the Belgians, and their own helplessness. Should they really embark on an utterly hopeless armed struggle. Zimbo roared: "Yes yes," the senates would be defeated, they were already defeated in America, they were running after the emigrants. They must be undermined, they'll be defeated here as well. And always the same imploring rejoinder: "We are not strong enough, we are not warriors. We have only weak people, sick. We won't be ready for decades."

Zimbo, as he left the unhappy woman, realised with disgust that she was right. He considered sending some of his bold friends here. But observing this lot's meek indolent demeanour, he withdrew in disgust. They would pass through the school of hard knocks. They needed the firm hand of a Marke or a Marduk. He flew to Hamburg. The Berlin-North German region was so strong, the people so changed, that only Zimbo and his immediate entourage retained western weaponry. The populace was feared for its warlike vigour. Whatever could not be forged by hand in a smithy or home workshop they despised. Zimbo made the looming threat clear to everyone. There was no panic. The metal bull-columns, no longer roaring, were decked in fresh greenery. Bright bunting was hung before the stone niche where the clothed body of the great white-faced Consul Marduk sat, holding a wooden sceptre. Zimbo himself discreetly stockpiled weaponry among the crumbling ruins of Hamburg and Hannover.

The masses on the western continents paid attention. Let the voyage to Greenland begin. To the north lay the vast peaceful land, the new continent that would be formed for them from the ice, the surging ocean, the heavy night. They would venture there in peace, to grow stronger, recuperate. The mighty lords of the devices would leave them alone. They would move unharried over soft uncovered ground, beneath newly sprouting plants and trees, among animals, fluttering birds, in the sky the light of ancient stars.

The townzones began to make arrangements.

PART SIX:
ICELAND

THE PLAN TO MELT GREENLAND

THE PLAN to melt Greenland jolted the cities like an earthquake. Astonishment bordering on horror sent thoughts haywire. Engineers physicists became engrossed in the plan. Senates everywhere recorded full attendance at debates. There was a sense of an existential decision. Senates were on edge, as wary as they had been of the free distribution of synthetic food.

The experts aimed to put the unparalleled power of melting glaciers to work for them. Their ambitions went farther: they would not rest at an ice-free Greenland, but would aim to change the climate of the whole northern hemisphere. The Greenland venture required exceptionally extensive sources of heat; there was no need to limit these to Greenland. The campaign could take in all the lands of the Arctic zone: Spitsbergen Zemlya Norway Baffin Land Grant Land the Parry Islands.

Delvil's adviser on physics and hydrography, Escoyez, a man born in Spain with a trace of Berber in him, half-merman who explored the most perilous ocean depths in constructions of his own devising, proposed to alter the salinity of Atlantic waters. He had studied the Gulf Stream along the coasts of Britain and Norway. He said: the Gulf Stream is more saline than the seawater through which it flows. The driver of the Gulf Stream is the change of seasons: summer expands the salt water, sends it flooding over colder water. That's all there is to the current. But salt water pulls salt water, one viscosity with the other. The quantity of warm water flowing from the equator northwards can be increased by seeding the vast bed of the ocean with salt, won from the ocean floor itself. The seafloor in the region of the great current can be fissured at wide intervals, the uplifted rock crushed. The leachate – Natrium chloride Magnesium Magnesium sulphate Calcium sulphate Potassium chloride Calcium bicarbonate – will pass into the water. What we must do is systematically widen the bed of the Gulf Stream with these salt-spewing fissures, from the coasts of Cuba Florida Newfoundland outward. The summer expansion, the flood of warm saline water, the transgression dragging adjacent salty waters along with it will grow tenfold, will stretch from the North Sea to Newfoundland.

Escoyez, tough tanned water-creature, declared: All you need do is expand the equatorial cauldron. If up till now folks on Greenland have shivered and those on Spitsbergen have cold noses, they shouldn't be surprised. If you wait for Nature to send roasted larks flying into your mouth, you're wrong. It just goes to show how dreadfully stupid people are, the way they treat climate and other earthly things as if they were divine law. Here's a divine law: a man goes hungry if he doesn't find himself some bread. And another divine law: a man should use his brain. You make your bed, you lie on it. (His mocking words meant: the same goes for the stream in its bed.) But only up till now. Humans can make their own divine law for the bed of the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream can't outsmart humans. Throw salt on its tail and it'll come straight away and sing to you.

Behind Escoyez' levity lay a deadly earnest. He and his colleagues were tasked to produce charts, scrape up rock samples. Above all he was encouraged to spread the enthralling rumour of an altered northern climate.

The eyes of other men were fixed on Greenland, on the shrinking glaciers. It was all the same to them what would become of the new continent, what benefits the new plan would bring. All they wondered was how to harness the unleashed forces; forces whose power their imaginations could never match. They made calculations of the extent and mass of the receding glaciers, of avalanches sliding into valleys, of the stores of pent-up water. The torrents cascading into the sea must represent a tremendous energy slope, a propulsive mechanism beyond calculation.

Energy technologists flung themselves at plans to exploit the Greenland energy slope. They aroused passion in those close to the Senate. They knew about avalanches that destroyed mighty forests by air pressure alone. Now, in a continent the size of Australia, an avalanche-swarm such as no continent had experienced would be triggered more or less simultaneously. The energy slope must not be dissipated; it would be absurd to let avalanches and entire seas slide unharnessed into the ocean. They must be captured, must yield up their energy. What the energy would be used for was irrelevant. No one in the Brussels Senate, briefed by the old phlegmatic Dane who was spokesman for the energy technologists, asked about it. No one thought of the waves of settlers and their dreams. What was certain was that the energy-slope all around the coast of Greenland must be tamed. The horse must not be allowed to gallop unharnessed out of the wilderness. Even if you end up with more energy than you need.

Before comprehensive plans had been drawn up, dwellers in the zones already felt an anxious urge to give up everything and spread out among neighbouring peoples. It was like a safety fuse, a need for connection, a sense of immersion: we don't want to be alone. Agents of the senates flitted through the towns of the northern continents; intense repetitious narrating reporting describing snooping. Everywhere eyes lit up. In Algeria, dissolving out of the landscape around Constantine and south of the Atlas Mountains from the shores of Shott-el-Djerid, came bands of Arabs drawn magnetically northwards. From Sicily, from the still teeming city of Raha on the Niger south of the Saharan sea, dark Gandus appeared; they sliced through the air in their flying cars, came down to land in London. A shiver went through them when they landed, heard in more detail what was planned.

PREPARATIONS FOR A WEDDING

OFF THE north coast of Scotland, bare rocky islands reared jagged spray-drenched from an angry sea: this was the gathering-ground for ships machines humans. Engineers physicists mathematicians geologists and their assistants made London Brussels their headquarters. They flourished a succession of blueprints, enticing stirring up. Everyone could see Greenland emerging, the continent hidden behind coastal mountains. The coastal mountains would be levelled like the stones of a castle wall. Greenland was an enchanted princess, surrounded by dragons. The mountains would sink away to reveal something proud, fabulous. Ice disintegrating over thousands of square miles, emergence of an ancient hidden land.

Initial preparations were made as early as spring. They considered every last detail of the coming campaign. They began to set up factories in Welsh valleys, on flat land outside Nivelles in Belgium, where they manufactured energy storage devices for electrical and other novel forces to be won from a demolished Iceland. Cages for the birds about to be trapped; giant nets: butterflies would be chased across the ocean, would yield to Europe and the heat. Into muddy Dutch soil they dug walls dunes concrete channels, as if preparing traps for monsters. Blasted passages and caves on the Irish Sea coast in the Berwyn Hills along the River Dee, underground runs through rock many miles long, to house the monstrous forces they would trap. In Chester Stafford Denbigh, buildings sprang up like sheaves in a field, sprawled among the settlements of people who had fled the cities – who adorned them with leaves stones secret spells. In the lowlands of Brabant, along the burrowing Maas, beside the sodden course of broad surging Rhine, sunken vaults and low wide facilities were constructed.

They were making preparations for a wedding. They flung themselves into the planning. The long dismal austere time had brought an abundance of inventions to fruition. They bypassed elementary stages; powers were poised to reveal themselves; feelers were sent out respecting what they had in mind. People in the zones recalled a fable of Egypt's Pharaoh: seven lean-kine years, seven fat. Better build food warehouses for an endless age. We'll find new strengths. Now human potential would be unleashed, gambolling across the Earth, arms waving.

SHETLAND

THE WATERS of the Atlantic washed the long coastlines of America and Europe. Their fluid mass filled the enormous rift between sundered continents. The gneiss mountains of Canada and Labrador had separated from Scottish mountains. Ragged and fractured the islands off the top of Scotland: Shetland and Orkney. Shetland a hundred islands. They rose out of leaden rolling waters from the submarine protrusion that carried the Irish landmass, the mountainous Highlands, southern lowlands.

Ships of the western city-states set course for Shetland. They anchored at sixty degrees north in the bays of Mainland. More and more vessels arrived.

High tide rolled over jagged claws; low tide revealed thousands of cliff-girt islets that showed their teeth, their stony bite. Then they were buried by the insinuating stumbling towering tottering spattering water that blew spray over them. Onto crunching beaches of shingle and shell, onto wild sea-stacks surf hurled itself, strands of hair from the sea that bared its breast offshore, bent its back to the dark Earth. Banks of shingle scrunched as water beat against the unclothed land, washed rubbed ground scrabbled scraped. It wore down promontories edges corners spits, so that it could heave benignly back and forth out in the open; Ocean, wide Atlantic waters, hundreds of miles, dark shackled being, heaving in an endless latticework of waves. At the rim of little cliffs islands Mainland, it allowed itself a hundred-yard drop for its restless heaving, then plunged miles down into lightless deeps, clung to the outer edge of Earth's rocky plinth, uniform rippling surging water, swept ruffled pushed along by tenuous breezes. Flying calling creatures flapped over it, vessels cut through it with caressing screws rudders wheels. People on its back. It conversed with the air. Thunder and howling around reefs, swirling around ships. Menacing mutterings, rolling roiling gurgling plashing gulping swinging bursting rattling shattering artillery fire under a cloud-covered sun, licking whip-cracking swinging at the sun. Evaporating in the heat, steaming melting vanishing as clouds under the white radiant sun.

One May day Kylin, a man grown up in the fjords of Scandinavia, flashed the green signal-lamp on the mainmast of his tall ship. Now the first two hundred vessels left the steep braes of Sumburgh Head at sixty degrees north. An hour later the summit of Ronas on Mainland had disappeared. The whir and clamour of the last bird-islets died away. Muckle Roe and Foula lay behind them, the jagged islands Yell Hascosay Samphrey Fetlar Uyea Unst.

They were encased and cradled in their two hundred ships. Decks of wood and steel, gentle soughing of the breeze. Sounds of plashing. Distant murmurs. Encased, hemmed in. Thin fluttery banks of cloud above. The sun white, caught in the watery mirror, flashing. It floated winking glittering shining.

BILLOWS OF OXYGEN NITROGEN
40 MILES HIGH

BILLOWS OF oxygen-nitrogen forty miles high, miles of hydrogen sent swirling by the Earth's globe through the dark energy-soaked diaphanous ether. The uppermost fringe of the gassy fabric slipped away, vanished like smoke from a burning torch. No ear heard the slinking sliding, the silky billowing of that distant fringe. The roll and tumble of the globe that carried it along perturbed the air. It swathed the Earth, snuggled up to the headlong body, spun in pursuit like a top let go.

Fiery hoyden, incinerating Hell of everything that creeps flies hops: the implausibly distant sun on the far side of the frigid ether. White seething sea of flame. It gleamed through cloud-banks, gave warmth. The fire-spewing white chaos of flames hung there in the distance like a burning town. Burning that never burns out. Earth circled the chaos. The boiling sun flung out gassy masses star-wide radiant vapours, hauled them back in.

Stood there, clanking ghostly apparition in darkness that shrank from it, gathered for attack. In its body metals burned, metallic clouds collapsed back onto it. Zinc Iron Nickel Cobalt, creeping into the rocks of the congealed Earth, Barium Sodium. They fell back as slag. Flares stood proud, were funnelled from the sea of flame out into the vibrating ether: a cyclone of burning hydrogen soaring seventy thousand miles. No splash when the gouts hurtled back onto the sun-body, were smelted anew, blazed. The standing flames that welcomed them bent like a cornfield in rain, stood straight again. No thunder from those primal forces. No avalanche or hurricane makes a noise like that of the living alluring sun. The raging sea of flame, everywhere simmering seething, exploding throwing up sheaves – if it came nearer, planets would turn to ashes and smoke – its song swallowed every sound far and near. Chirruping chirping of cicadas magnified a millionfold. Chattering metals. In between, the never-fading clash and drumroll that imposed itself on every earthly burning thing and lurked behind every roaring noise. Strontium bright purple-red, Magnesium crushed beneath the heavy mountains of Earth, fiery breath upon fiery breath. Primordial beings – Helium Manganese Calcium – bloom and smoulder freely, dazzling when they light up in a light beyond what any eye can see, draining every colour. Radiant streaming this hundred-voiced chattering sea of flame, flare-hurling primordial world in the ether.

A long way from the sun's surging crashing streaming burning: little grey Earth. Running like a weasel across a field. Laced about with vapours, damp mists, its fires encased in a crust of slag, damped down by oceans rivers ice. No clouds of burning metal driven by their own ferocity rain down on it. As a glazier uses force to press glass and wood against putty and it sticks tight, as a fist squeezes snow between curled fingers and palm and presses it to a hard ball and the snow no longer drifts, just so the Earth, its embers fading radiating helplessly away, is caught by ethereal ice, and yields creaking. Its interior seethes and burns; the body is impounded beneath ashes.

This is Earth. Above and below, a primordial world of light and fire. An undulating mantle of rock clothes its torso. The rock goes down for miles and rises miles high. Continents and islands carry mountains plains steppes deserts. Water breaks out from its sources in the mountains, oceans flood the basins. Mountains gneiss slate float heavily on molten flowing burning masses that break out now and then through stony crust to soften them with stabbing flames and shake them back and forth.

Asia spreads its body wide across the northern half of the Earth, over a hundred and forty six degrees of longitude and eighty seven degrees of latitude. With Gondwana, Angaraland, the China plates it rose from the mirror of the great oceans, allowed its seas to dry up. Its spine is the Altai, the Himalayan massif from the Hsing'an to the Pamirs, from Karakorum to Bhutan and the bend of the Dihang Gorge. The Caspian-Urals depression, abandoned by the sea, sucks in the Volga and Ural rivers, feasts on their silt. Glaciers cover the Kunlun. Its borders are snow mountains, sandy deserts in the east, Tibet of the yak, the green hills and loess plains of China, Manchurian meadows. Mountains fall steeply south to the flat swampy expanses of Hindustan, the hot land of Bengal. Blooming shores of India, paddy-fields, plantations of sugarcane, sago, coconut palms. Swamp forests of the Sundarbans, Terai where bright royal tigers prowl, long-eared elephants, four-handed gibbons. River after river northward to the sea of ice through Siberian grasslands, marshy tundra freezing steppe. The long-haired Kashgar panther prowls as far as the Lena.

Attached to this eastern stronghold, many-limbed little Europe. The young soaring Alps, ancient horst mountains in Thrace Corsica Spain, rock layers thrust up by pressure, decked in rubble. Sunken land in the south where the Mediterranean has burst into the yawning basin.

Africa besieged by rainstorms and the sun's heat. Land extending over eleven million square miles, a table laid flat. Rice sorghum coffee maize fiery spices shoot from the earth. Bare ancient massifs of granite and mica-schist stand tall, a blanket of sandstone stretches away. Under the sun's burning, rocks crumble to rubble, are transformed into soil and clay, coloured red by iron. Lakes Tanganyika and Nyasa fill the highland rifts, their ramparts fringed by volcanoes. Ten big lakes feed the Congo Niger Zambesi. The savannah sends up enormous grasses. Gallery forests along riverbanks. Lemurs and apes, the elegant zebra, okapi in the forests. Tree-like stems of the banana with leaves six yards long; the mighty leaves are enclosed in sheaths; dense clumps of the great berry-fruit hang down.

From Cape Murchison to Cape Horn, the western stronghold: America. A severely folded mountain belt runs through the continent from the southern extremity to the Mackenzie River, a lowlying basin from the sea of ice to the sultry Gulf of Mexico. To the north, deep beds of five Great Lakes. The mighty Mississippi surges south through plains, to it from the

Appalachians comes the Ohio, and the Missouri from the Cordillera. Having folded Earth's stiff skin in the west, the double chain of mountains follows the western ocean like a wall. Primal forests surround the Amazon, called Tungurahua in its upper course, then Marañon; the Earth gives birth to it in Lake Lauricocha; it carries with it two hundred rivers, black and white from soils of chalk and iron, until it spills into the ocean.

Primordial beings have entrenched themselves in the seas: Hydrogen, Oxygen. They stream across the globe, Arctic Atlantic Pacific waters. Water, steady flowing entity, heavy changeable being that sprays and steams, forms clouds, drifts as snow, tremulous being along low shores, menacing black ragged phenomena of hurricane and storm flood. It sucks itself full of salts, Sodium chloride Magnesium Calcium, makes itself heavy, milk-white in the Gulf of Guinea, cinnamon coloured the Gulf of California, yellow-brown the Indian Ocean. Warm and cold currents surge through the oceans, coloured bands; silvery mists lie over them where they meet.

Primordial beings waft around the globe, burn and flow in its body, overburden it with solid and motile masses: they are Friction Gravity Heat Light, are Sulphur Chromium Manganese Silicon Phosphorous. They are soil and sand. Are silent crystals, flowers, lichens doggedly germinating all across the land, flowering plants, fish that swim, birds that sing and call to one another, creeping predators, pounding fighting people, snailshells on seashores, bacteria vines dead trees, rotting roots, worms, beetles laying eggs.

Kylin's two hundred ships set off from sixty degrees north, left the Shetland Isles behind, swept across the ocean. They travelled in the warm drift that washes against Norway, melts the ice of Finnmark. Beneath them a long underwater mountain ridge extended down the Atlantic southward, widening near the islands of Ascension and Saint Helena, chains branching off to America and Africa. Silent seas atop valleys mountains sunk in darkness. Beneath the ships the ocean fell away two miles deep. Birds whirled in the wind over the roaring sea alongside the giant ships, animal species with eyes bones skin just like people. Stormy petrels dived onto threshing fish, herring-gulls with serrated tails, pointed wings. The water through which the giant ships plunged, black-green deliquescent glassy mass, brimming with animals and plants, tracked the ships' advance. Slimy clumps of primal beings glued themselves to the hulls, clung to the screws, accompanied them across the sea trailing little threadlike feet. In the damp dark of evening, sea-angels like butterflies emerged, uncountable hordes of cliones, at daybreak sank back down. On the sea-floor snailfish lurked, holding fast with their adhesive disc. Tender sea-cucumbers, rattails grew deep down on reefs alongside sea-nettles. Animal skeletons sank, clothed the sea-floor in ooze; small-eyed bristle-worms slender bloodworms crawled through and over them among clumps of seaweed. In the sunlit surface zone, comb-jellies went on their way, silent greedy creatures, siphonophores that lit up like garlands of flowers, each a whole city of countless transparent glassy animals strung on a line that nourished them. Salmon sped beneath the keels, tiny crustaceans clinging to their skin and gills. The fleet crossed the silent underwater sill of Thomson Ridge. It hit ten degrees west.

ICELAND

ICELAND WAS an island below sixty-five degrees north at fifteen degrees west; the Arctic Circle just touched its northern edge. Two islands spewing lava from volcanoes had created this mountainous plate whose jagged flanks, claws of a giant crab, reached into the misty surging sea. The people on the ships drew near. They planned to rip open the island's volcanoes, convey their fires to Greenland.

The south of the island was covered by glaciers. Hekla and Skaftar-jökull were mountains whose vents emitted sulphurous fumes. In the north the Lake of Midges steamed with thirty-four lava islets; Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur hurled into it blue and honey-yellow boulders from their broad calderas. Boulders shot househigh, crashed back into the crater, tumbled steaming downslope. The island's wastelands many miles across; lava-fields, wrinkled congealed rivers of rock, bare brown boulders, shattered cliffs. Burnt dead plains. In crevices in the lava, water sparkled. Springs fountained hot water. At the southern edge of the wasteland were Geysir and Strokkur; their wide basins held bright blue water that pulsed. Now and then the basins erupted: water rose hissing, arced over the edge of the crater, fell back gurgling.

When the stolid blond Swede Kylin and his company came ashore at the mouth of Eyja-fjord and flew over the island – whirlwinds across the land, the burning mountains, pitted terrain – they found human settlements near the coast. One was near their landing place; sheep and small children wandered the hills. What they must do would be done without these. Hostility to the expedition could be expected. Kylin and his party swarmed over Krafla, near the Lake of Midges. It was active: the island groaned for miles under the pounding from hot magma breaking through deep rock. Quakes rippled across the island. Pilots circling high above the flanks of dead mountains suddenly saw chasms and long black fissures opening. Often, enveloped in thin vapours, they had to descend, react quick as lightning to choking sulphurous gases. They flew delighted around the stamping gaping monster that sat there by the lake, churning up the land and making the whinnying snorting surface waters foam. In these chasms lay the immense heat they craved and would extract, to fling it onto Greenland, the white mountain-high carapace of ice that would start to mist steam break apart,

glaciers from Cape Grival, Kangerdlussuak, Aggas Island. Iceland was burning. Must burn harder. A cloud-hurling thunder-blazing forge was being prepared.

When Kylin turned east in the gathering dusk to the area of the landing-place, little lights were flashing on and off along the coast like pitiful little warning signals. For two and a half hours Kylin and his companions – flying uneasily, landing on a patch of scree, darting aloft again – watched these tremulous signals out of the night. Until they ceased. In a long line, flying slowly and very high, the scouts noisily approached the soaring cliffs of the fjord, black in moonlight. Waves murmured. They set foot on a gently sloping meadow near the shimmering tent-houses of the landing place. They hurried downhill in the moonlight. Tripped over soft bodies. When they bent down grabbed turned the bodies over, they saw round immobile alien faces. The teeth were exposed in a laugh, tip of the tongue poking out. Once let go the bodies dropped, rolled onto the back, the other shoulder. A figure emerged from one of the tents, hastened towards them, led them on down. The natives in the nearby village had become nosy, asked what the expedition was planning, had taken four expeditionaries hostage so that nothing would happen and the foreigners would leave quickly. So the newcomers had pretended to go back to the ships, then reclaimed the hostages, and when darkness fell trained their Balearic lights on the coast. These were lights that penetrated human skin, enveloped it and closed it off with a glaze like shellac. The blood was seized with a great hunger for oxygen. You start to tremble, the heart races, the breath can't keep up. You devour yourself, blood leaks from its vessels bright red, pink around mouth and nose, you collapse into pools of blood that swirl on the ground and fizz without clotting.

Next morning they flung five hundred human corpses along with cadavers of cattle and sheep into the sloshing fjord. Blond Kylin sat glumly outside his tent, eyes fixed on the purple ground, heard the endless tramping as people dragged yet more bodies past, these now of village children and infants that they threw from a bluff into the spraying water. When a gust of wind blew sand into his face and sent his cap askew, Kylin stood up, called for his escort and slouched seawards. More people came from the ships. Kylin felt anger and disgust. Burly Prouvas grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Kylin," the merry fellow roared, "it's another day. You lot are still alive. And we thought you'd stumble first into the cauldron. Even before Greenland."

"Prouvas, I'm not in the mood."

"So I see. You know, you almost flew into our lights."

Another, even stockier, clad all in black leather, put an arm around Kylin: "Whoo. Iceland wind. The ground's shaking horribly. It's more fun on the ships. We're glad you're alive."

Kylin, still looking at the ground: "How did it happen, Prouvas, with the lights? Who ordered the use of lights?"

Prouvas stepped back astonished. "The lights? It worked, didn't it? They've been dragging bodies all morning. Come over here."

Black-leather man: "Not a mouse escaped. Perhaps Kylin caught a little dose."

"I didn't go near the lights, Prouvas, Wollaston. So many bodies. The whole village."

"The lot. Animals too. The light has no eyes, doesn't choose its targets."

Kylin straightened, placed both hands to his face, shook himself, spat. Quietly: "Phooey. It's OK."

The other two gave a honking laugh: "Well then, Kylin. It's OK."

"It was brutal."

Prouvas put an arm around leather-man: "Hey, look at Marduk the Second. Go found a kingdom, my son, but stop hiding your face."

His hands dropped: "Come away from here. How many more bodies to be cleared."

Prouvas: "You should have seen it. The light-beams were such a sight. One minute they're running as if they're about to sneeze, then they sit down really really slowly, all the same way. I think they were crying, water was pouring from their eyes. And then they were dead."

Wollaston: "If it's fifty gone so it's fifty. If a hundred, a hundred. If they're dead they're dead. They couldn't stay there."

Kylin glared from his blue-green eyes: "I am the leader."

"Glad to hear it."

"I am the leader. I said nothing about exterminating people."

Wollaston, roaring: "Did we plan it? I? Or Prouvas? Did we exterminate them? Those people had to go. They won't be the last. If you're weakening, you'd better hand over to someone else."

Kylin, calmly: "What do you think, Prouvas?"

"Not exactly what Wollaston says. But I did use the light-beams."

Kylin in his padded aviator jacket: "Half a day. Stand in for me."

Towards evening Kylin flew out to the fleet offshore.

His sister, who was with the expedition, comforted the furious man, who kept declaring his disgust with himself, he's fallen in with beasts; he'll join the English settlers, go to Zimbo. For hours the purpose of the expedition evaded Kylin. He howled: It's a lie what they are doing. That first step made everything clear. As he stood beside his plane he clapped a hand to his forehead with a quizzical smile: "They should have seen me in Brussels. Really. How it chills you to the bone, hearing what Marduk and the others say. Are we getting into mischief here?"

His sister hugged him, eyes sparkling: "Maybe it is mischief, little brother. But something more as well. You know it too, in your better moments. You'll know it later. Can you hear the volcanoes? Look at them. We'll seize hold of them.

Think, brother, we'll have them." She shoved him off his seat, reached for the steering wheel, laughed: "Allow me the pleasure."

The ships sailed a northwesterly course. They anchored far out to sea opposite Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur. The scene delighted the fleet. The aviators followed the coast from Ingolfs-Höfdi up to Glettinge-nes. Coast islands hinterland were devoid of humans, the lava desert to the south was shrouded in smoke. Pilots flew up from the carriers in protective masks, women by the dozen among them, always in danger of being engulfed or scorched by gouts of flame. They took photos of the fearsome landscape of swirling lakes, flew on their metal wings through the inferno, came down for a break, sped back up. Further south in the interior more sulphur fumes, craters forming. Geysers stopped erupting. Instead, gas trickled huffed from fissures chasms; with it a deep hollow rumble. Kylin's expedition could set to work without fear of human opposition. It was certain, the volcano lay atop an enormous fiery magmatic hearth. No need to worry whether the hearth was encapsulated in the Earth's solid crust, ensconced in a cavern as a blister of the great layer of molten magma, or if it was Earth's magma itself, the nickel-iron of Earth's body that was breaking through the silicon-magnesium layer that encrusted it, floated on it. You just had to set to.

And Earth came to meet them; the boil was ready to burst. They made contact with the fleets coming behind. Amid the roar of yawning Krafla, hissing rain of ashes, a meeting of the leaders of the convoys took place in a bay. Kylin held back. De Barros from the second fleet pointed to Krafla: "You hear that thing, and my voice. Can one drown out the other? No. Look at my head or my hand, and at Krafla. Oho, it's big, is Krafla. Could swallow six thousand, six million people and not grow fatter. We shall converse with Goliath. He'll bluster with his head, his belly, he'll rage. Indian war-cries. One in the flank and he's done for. Nothing left but a pile of rubble."

Pliant Kylin, the expedition's gangling elastic often moody commander-in-chief, had found himself again. He was a proud clear creature. Squinting at the smoke he lifted his smooth short upper lip: "This is the start. It's good, yes it's good that we've all come together. A shame it's so far from the continents, but never mind. Maybe we shall lay ourselves like volcanoes over the sleeping stupid continents, with all they contain, all that supports them." He dreamed: conscious at last, on Iceland.

Along a front of forty miles the working ships took up position off the island's north coast. An eastern group entered Thistil-fjördur. The ships with Kylin's team anchored off the Rifstangi peninsula in sight of bald Mount Svalbard. The western group stretched as far as Eyja-fjord, under squalls of snow from Rimar. The sea was whipped by the unending storm. The ships were colossi. To the rear and some distance from them, lower rounder smaller vessels rocked at anchor: these stored the machines devices supplies ores explosives metals; they were the technical auxiliaries. The fleet obtained its motive power from massive cables laid by the working ships all the way from Scandinavia across the continental shelf, the deep sea abyss, the Arctic-Scotland Rise. The cable, encased in insulation, bulged at intervals with access points. Cables sent down to look for them in shallow water, guided from boats, felt along the main cable, hooked and gripped and buried themselves in a bulge. Trenchers and smoothers went ahead of the main cable, pushed masses of sand aside, trailed the cable behind them. Current from local sources activated the bulge. And already the energy of distant lands, the power of waterfalls swelled into the quivering cable, hurled itself at machines roaring into life, surged through the ships.

To the north of black ash-strewn Mývatn, Lake of Midges, rose Krafla with its invisible raging hissing. Leir-hnjúkur beside it. Exultant Prouvas gazed from the heights of Svalbard across the rapids and whirlpools of the Jökulsa to the volcano. At the same time, ten miles away on Rimar, high on silent dust-covered Myrkarr glacier, burly Wollaston was laughing. He scuffed the ground until snow showed white. Dug his pole into the rubble: "Reveal yourself, glacier! Myrkarr, great Myrkarr! To think you see us here. There'll be such a show. You've never seen the like, not since you've been astir. Krafla's still spewing. Won't spew for much longer. Its tongue will hang out. All gone." He almost choked in the smoke: "Soon no one will know you were ever here, Krafla, Leir-hnjúkur."

By the time the middle fleet started laying bridgeworks, the storm had died away. A calm came, with rain. The island undulated as usual. Smoke blew eastwards at altitude. Fiery pillars lit the night. They laid bridgeworks up from Öxar-fjord to the heights of Burfell, from the tip of Rimar peninsula across the hills to Rimar peak, from Rifstangi peninsula in Thistil-fjord up to Svalbard. The bridgeworks rose at a slant inland from the surf, then the wide light spans of viaducts swung into the country, over spates that foamed from heights, across rubblefields moorland dead lava, through cool mist-wreathed rain-hung air to lofty Svalbard, the great Myrkarr glacier, Rimar's jagged summit.

Piles and abutments were not rammed into the ground. Metal fliers took off, landed twenty thirty strong along a cliff, down a slope. They cleared coarse rubble and stones, hacked with picks and hammers, burned flat-bottomed holes in the rock. Into these they laid thin plates, light nondescript blue-green wafers the size of a hand, square, like little shields hanging from their chest-straps. To charge them, they connected the plates to a branch of the electric cable they had hauled up with them. As soon as it cracked onto the plates they let go, dropped them into the shallow hole, whirled aloft. The plates, thin compressed leaves, smouldered. The charged upper plate glowed melted. Its melting into the second plate intensified the heat. The intimately blended burning first and second drew the rigid third into the blaze. This split with a crackle, sent splashes sideways and into the hole, then suddenly softened with a shriek and gave itself to the white fire that burned ever more transparently blue. And as the whistling wheezing rigid scorching slurping thing rolled itself up, the final plate bent stretched as if in cramp, beat about itself, pulled and stretched into hair-fine glass, a glimmering skin around the three fiery plates. The ball grew tall, white, blue-white, bright blue, spread out, spread. It liquefied, burst apart, and at once every colour was gone from the arm-high flame. Nothing left but a hard rigid despotic breath, a gasp.

And already it had disappeared from the rock surface, plunged deep into the rock. Giving up its life to the fire it steamed groaned in the depths; above it, molten rock oozed out like gelatine.

Circling fliers descended on the melting already congealing cliffside. Pile-setters approached the hissing openings, planted tall piles into the stewing mass, held them steady until the air stopped quivering and the rocky glass-like gruel clamped about the foot of the pile.

All across the land, pile after pile was embedded in rock. A line of piles from Kylin's camp crossed the Jökulsa. A line climbed from Öxarfjord across Burfell. A line advanced mightily from Rimar, clambered over the Myrkarr glacier, reached the Skjalfanda river; came to a halt on the lava plain of Odaða-hraun. It was a wide stone-strewn being that grew here, boulder jostling boulder. Onto this foundation of piles were set ring-shaped coil drums, borne on roller bearings. Section by section the mobile support framework covering a whole pile-group was swung in swivelled about on its turntable, railbed was won, and on to the next pile group. Soaring bridgeworks with their enormous spans covered the region from wild ocean to the black lake of Myvatn. Below them buried in palls of smoke lay fissured grey-blue glaciers, rubble plains, valleys with narrow floors and precipitous sides. Fearlessly the piles advanced towards the spewing volcanic plateau.

Barely a week later the first wagons were running on rails that they themselves laid on the smooth railbed. Over them rolled the train, beneath it the long bow of rails stretching into the distance before and behind, elongated ovals rounding off the line of wagons at head and tail. The train spun steel from two rings, sped over the new-laid rails, pulled more from overhead to its advancing feet. Thus did they thunder over bridges, cast dazzling headlight beams, all day and in the total dark of smoke and night, guided by magnetic strips laid in the railbed. Under rising squalls, from the bowels of the ships of all three fleets they lifted and secured on wagons the machines by means of which Krafla the gurgling volcano and Leir-hnjúkur the steaming mountain-splitting monster would be destroyed.

Kylin had imbued the machines with novel powers. He was of Marduk's school. Just as Marduk had forced trees, had in the most horrible ways stimulated the life in them to tumultuous growth and overgrowth, so his Swedish pupil had made himself master of rocks and crystals. He had discovered the food with which to nourish rocks. For hour after enraptured hour he had watched crystals flower and arrange themselves. The spread of needles and iceflowers on the windowpane when he breathed had been his first miracle. And when he saw great lanky Marduk the botanist working away with his dried seeds germlings long hairy roots grafting-slips snipped-off leaves – under the breath of nutritive gases and growth stimulants the stems sprouted webs, filters and vessels, the vegetative tip of a naked pine needle pushed out its swellings, cell membrane laid upon cell membrane – the desire came over Kylin to play like this with stone and crystal. There was something lascivious brazen unworthy in the desire, but it carried him away; a fervid sombre mood lay on him. As he watched the drenching-tanks and heating tubes in which he had set out his crystals, he felt – challenged; they refused to grow as he wanted; he must become master. Must be able to hunt them like animals: is a stone superior to a horse?

He subjected them to heat, new solution mixes, electromagnetic forces. Until here and there something in them became tractable. Then he felt them over with rays that bounced back, penetrated, left them cold, heated them up. He saw that these rocks were sensitive and allowed themselves to be selected by heat pressure radiation as an animal species is by blood serum. It wasn't the chance shape of the crystal that counted, but the tiniest part, the primordial being imprisoned in the crystal, the way it had interlocked itself, become embedded, bound up. Now you could rouse it, map its transformations any way you wanted.

One misty morning, the sleek machines sped along the rounded humming rails that climbed ever higher over the soaring bridgeworks. Barely six feet high, the machines, low and long like the wagons on which they were mounted. At their head were holes, eye sockets that could turn with the head from side to side, up and down. Some fifty chosen men and women sat on each machine. The air was filled with whirring fliers, deterred neither by driving rain nor by fear of what was coming. The Jökulsa River with its rapids roared in its sandy bed. It came from a distant glacier, hurled dirty grey water past angry Krafla. When smoke lifted from Lake Myvatn the course of the dark Salmon River became visible, surging from the lake like a whipped screaming demon, heaping up, showered with lava bombs that the river overran, trampled, pushed aside. The throaty rattle of the jouncing waters could be heard on the heights, you could see foam spraying enraged over boulders. Black and silent beyond lay the peaks of the Fiski Plain.

The mountains around the volcano lay placid. But now a strange life came over them. As if they twitched an eyelash, the eyelid closed, twitched the lash again. Krafla started up. And soon Leir-hnjúkur started up. Her east flank north flank west flank moved, the load on her shifted, rose, rose higher as if something was tickling her. The stolid flanks facing the graceful bridgeworks were engulfed in an endless avalanche of stones that shrouded the flanks like a mist. The haze grew thicker. And as it spread out from the mountains the people on the bridges heard a crack! beyond all earthly measure. An unending scraping grumbling booming that grew steadily to drown out the cackling rattling of the volcano, overwhelm it so that none could tell how it was rising up to the heavens, what direction it was coming from. It boomed and roared from south west east north, yet the roar came only from the flanks of the volcano as they lifted slowly behind the avalanche of stones as if thrust by an earthquake up out of soft ground. The flanks rose like a slowly lifting finger. Like a sleeper who stretches, back slowly straightening, arms spreading, eyes still half closed, dreaming; presses tongue to gums, smacks.

Under the gaze from Kylin's machines they grew, were pushed up pumped up. Behind the surging ever-thickening veil of stones, boulders of dead lava tumbled from the quaking flanks too fast to see, crumpled crusty streams of lava

squeezed out, shattered, jangled like slates, grinding scraping against each other. The flanks pulled themselves erect and swelled like blisters from an unseen core.

Krafla the sluggard grew legs. Its cloak of stone was already raining down on dirty Jökulsa, the river that melted from the Askja glacier to flow past here. Rocks and lava, black porous ejecta danced on the water, stirred up the spraying surface, and already they had overwhelmed the river, buried it miles wide, a mass of rocks swelled out of the forging current, the river was buried alive, barricaded, cut off from the sea. To north and west the rocky veil crept around the mountain walls. West of Krafla the flanks of Leir-hnjúkur were smoking. The rain of stones filled hollows in the ancient rubble field, crushed and shattered man-high caves of tuff.

Now the summit of Krafla creased, collapsed. Not a sound of it reached the ear amid the steady roar and rumble of the swelling mountain. And at once the steep shaft of fire over Krafla was extinguished. In its place a swirl of black smoke that clumped ever denser, shooting high in whooshing puffs, a mile-high pillar over strangled Krafla. And simultaneously the flanks of the volcano, growing heaving ever higher, ever tumbling, began to rock and sway as black as shadows behind the veil of stones, like a shroud caught in the wind. These motile mountains were mountains no longer. Grew into the air, fell back to the land, across the shattering lavafields, the shores of Myvatn. Steamed and flamed. Little flames appeared, bluish, green, flicking magically here and there. Flashes like miners' lamps, off, another flash. Below them the heaving rolling volcano wall: cloud-high giant ship ploughing through black land. More frequent now the licking flames, they swarmed as the mountains spread; above them, ever more extruded towering masses of mountain tottered, crashed into the smoke-seething crater, soundlessly.

All of a sudden, into the enormous booming grumbling was mixed a snorting, huffing – deep primevally deep abysmally deep, emerging out of the ground. Puffing hissing as from a kettle. It subsided slowly, then haltingly swelled again. The green-blue lights meanwhile continued flickering on the advancing rockwalls. Yellow flames jabbed through the green, twitched stabbed straight up, twisted about themselves. Smoke swirled huge and black over the shattered volcano.

Now: rip whack crack boom.

Mountain-mass dissipated, Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur pulverised.

Glowing smouldering across all the land, fires snapping at the sky.

Flying boulders of basalt and granite, lava bombs shooting high, back down. While the mountain-mass sinks away.

From the rift in the Earth gushed red-hot streams, molten rock from the Earth's insides together with the burning carcasses of the shattered volcanoes. The flaming streams made their way growling across the land. To the south the tottering glowing rims of the volcanoes still stood, fissured mutilated. They crumbled toppled, laid themselves over the hot sucking bed. The fiery stream overran the land to the south as far as the foot of mighty Blafjall. Into black Myvatn rolled the fiery stream, surged into the water down to the lakebed, crept along unquenched. It sank its teeth in the water, swallowed it down. On its back water seethed and steamed. It lashed about on the lakebed. Flung aside unravelled turned to smoke scorched whatever it encountered. Blood-red its long serpent body. It surged across the whole width of the lake to the southern shore.

As the lurid glow spread across the darkened sky, became whiter and whiter, the leaders gathered on De Barros' ship on the north shore of Öxar-fjord. De Barros grunted with pleasure, embraced taciturn blond Kylin: "Kylin, you'll be the talk of the world. The world is already talking about you: listen to it. Are you still sad about the little ladies and the kiddies?"

The Swede's hard smooth face: "I am not sad, De Barros."

De Barras danced with fat Prouvas: "Kylin, what's bigger: a human or a mountain? A human or a volcano? Haha! Charged with the murder of two volcanoes. Of a pretty black lake too and, in addition, of a grown-up river."

"Leave it, De Barros."

"I'm all for order and justice. And how many animals have you roasted choked squashed mangled and left them unburied and failed to come to their aid. Take spiders, sitting in cracks in the mountain half a million at a time. Thirty-six thousand flies, young and old, together with their still living ancestors and descendants. Families, mothers. Foully murdered, done away with. How could you do it! Who could do it! And the salmon in the rivers, midges in the lake, and the ferns, mosses, grasses on the ground: all gone. Ruthless, ruthless. Haha! Kylin, you'll be hauled before the Lord of the Flies, before the god of salmon flies spiders."

"I am not in the least amused, De Barros."

Kylin's sister gazed beatifically at the flaming sky, her head well back. She laughed without looking at Kylin, proudly: "Right, what's bigger, a volcano or a human?"

"A volcano."

For the whole day hot white masses oozed from Earth's body in rivulets and sloshing cataracts. In a furious clattering they blanketed the old frozen lava fields along the Skjalfanda River. The short hissing night passed. Feeble sunlight played again at the edges of black and brown-red clouds. Burning ash bored through the black-red murk of the island, rattled through hot air pregnant with sulphur and ammonia. The human assailants lay low in Eyja-fjord. Avalanches slid down rocky slopes, whipped up the sea. Pilots rising masked into the air sent squalls ahead and below for protection against the mutilated howling Earth. The dismal palls of smoke were blown away; they could see and measure the extent of the naked fiery flume, the jagged gigantic chasm that led straight down into the abyss of the ruptured ground.

The island trembled, shook itself in fear and torment. Between evaporated Myvatn and the headlong breathless

Skjalfanda swollen with meltwater, suddenly as they flew there appeared a great fissure that cut across the lakebed; on each side a line of domes rose as if punched up through the ground. They wheezed brown mud and steam. The ground swayed and jolted. Creaks and crackles all along the edges of the fissure. They pouted like sulky lips. For minutes the domes emitted not a breath. And as the fissure wiggled like a worm, a dome grew from it soundlessly, wide, wider, its rising flanks engulfed the other domes, its foot traversed the infilled fissure. The relentless dome carried on it all the land on the right bank of the Salmon River. And rising a hundred metres, a thousand metres, swathed in sulphurous steam, the summit of the new volcano split like the barrel of a cannon. The sky howled yellow and black with a scream that lasted a quarter of an hour as vertical streams of ejecta peppered it with lava and fire. The Salmon River steamed in the lava flow, as did the Jökulsa east of Myvatn. The mighty Skjalfanda River, fed by the eternal ice of Trölla-dyngja, hurled its broad chill mass against the invading streams of fire: it turned to white steam. The fire ran along its bed, drew the mighty stream into its jaws and did away with it. Cut off from the sea it was not dammed into a lake: the water sped aloft as vapour, driven miles high by unquenchable heat, to fall back where it may. Icy winds carried it west across the vast ocean.

From the Jökulsa to the Skjalfanda, Iceland had disappeared. But Earth's hot innards had risen up between the two furious fitful rivers. Like a giant placing first one foot on the steps, the groping hand is visible, about to climb higher, step through the gap, burst out on every side to gain space.

Not a day had passed since the tiny flesh-and-bone assailants demolished two mountains. Now Iceland smouldered many miles square from two huge basins, east and west of the Skjalfanda.

Odaða-hraun, the Lavafield of Iniquity, lay between the incandescent basins. It covered a hundred square miles, extending south from Myvatn between the Skjalfanda and the Jökulsa. Coal-black lava was its ground. Black volcanic sand flew over it. Slag heaped up on it like ice floes. To the south rose the crater of Dyngju-fjöll and the broad depression of Askja with its dark green lake, surrounded by mountains. The Dyngju-fjöll crater had already been grumbling for a while; Askja had swallowed its lake. Fire had crept from its floor, the glow sometimes faded, thin ashes hissed down onto the wastes of Odaða-hraun.

The fleets left the north coast to tackle from the east the volcanoes of the Odaða-hraun desert, onto which the fiery streams from ruined Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur were emptying. Vopna-fjord cut deep into the land; from Vopna-fjord the first lines of bridgework were thrown up. The bridgeworks had to cross huge distances. Others came up from the south, from Mjoi-fjord, Reyðar-fjord. As the island shook under blows from the volcanoes, people swarmed over the east coast icefields, their tops strewn with ash. Volcano after volcano stretched away in a north to northeasterly line towards the living lava field of the iniquity. Great Dyngja Herðubreið Tögl had awoken. The crater of great Dyngja, six hundred yards across, was plugged by its own debris. It burned through a vent in the middle. Broad-shouldered Herðubreið, free-standing with its dark flanks: a giant, roofed with snow; rivers ran from it. Age-old Skjald-breiður: its crater box-shaped, two hundred feet across, inert for a whole geological era. Ice covered it, from which water flooded into the valley. The mountain snorted and gurgled: it had brought forth the lava that built the black strange vast Odaða-hraun. It hissed; from vents in its eastern flank came long strings of smoke. It swayed and jolted.

The assault trains rolled across the icy ash-strewn eastern ranges. The bridgeworks were all interconnected; any train, if a bridge behind it was destroyed or damaged, could seek out a nearby track. The assailants had planned to defend the wagons and expensive machines against hot ejecta. But it was obvious that neither supports nor wagons could be protected from the heaving flaming ground. Abandoning the demolition-trains, the ships positioned themselves in the bay of Heraðs-floi, south of Vopna-fjord, behind a rampart of hills. Into this bay plunged the dirty grey Jökla River, leaping through clefts from its source in three glaciers; spates tumbled into it, sandbanks piled up; its banks were smooth sand where it emptied into the sea. Alongside it flowed the Lagar River, its milky-white waters welling from a glacier half a mile high. It seethed over cataracts, spread wide as a lake, shook itself free of glacial gravel and mud when it entered Heraðs-floi. The ships of the fleet lay between the two rivermouths, not dropping anchor, engines at full power. Wind blew sharp off the land. Fine ash-dust blew out across the sea.

Morning dawned far behind across the ocean. Wagons jerked and jolted, following their designated paths over the bridgeworks. They approached clanging, threw out supports as they came. The ships in dark Heraðs-floi steamed slowly east, out to sea.

BASALT

THE ROCKS of the mountains beyond the coastal glaciers, south of black quivering Odaða-hraun, were still drinking greedily of the juices yielded by the snow that lay heavy on them. They let the sources of the rivers run over them; the energy coming from the Earth made them quake, they lay dead, weathered; had endless time; tenuous mists wreathed about their bodies. The stones felt someone calling them by name.

Basalt was the mighty blanket that had solidified on the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. It covered three hundred thousand square miles. Scotland Iceland Greenland were erected on this base; it was a thousand yards thick. It lay stacked in steps and banks, strewn with cemented fragmented tuff. Wind and water weathered its surface to a brown-yellow wacke. On Iceland, the island at sixty-five degrees north, it formed the domes and crests of mountains, created the fissures that extended from south to northeast, the steep-sided trench of Myrdals-jökull, the Laki fissure with its hundred craters. There stood the mountains, jumble interknit with jumble like a meadow where a sower has cast a hundred seeds of a hundred different species; they shoot up, become a matted web. Rocks grinding juddering together once the fire had left them. Nothing grew in the desolate mix; they slumped too slowly for perception, water had its slowly dissolving way, heat and cold, pressure of the weight upon and around them. Chalcedon and zeolite lay in cavities in the basalt. Its dark mass, spheres plates fans many feet thick, imprisoned dense green-black olivine, titanium-iron ore, burrowing augite, plagioclase. Deep in the basalt dykes they meshed glassily into one another.

Now something came over this congealed being that had the inherent quality of fire. As when a human who has knocked about for decades in foreign parts, from bitter necessity has struggled day by day to live, and among the foreigners knows nothing but struggle flail hit out – one noontime he encounters a man he does not know. Who gives him a letter from home, talks to him in his own language, asks him what he's been up to so long, why not come back.

Or like an unloved married woman who has lived a long time at the side of the odious rough husband, borne him one child after another, is already dull and spiteful, and suddenly, while lying sick, she calls to mind a childhood friend. And he comes – there's someone here, oh miracle, to straighten the blankets for her, hold the spouted cup to her mouth while his hand supports her frail back. Her breath is stormy, and when she recovers there comes a moment when, among the little children in the parlour, she presses the strange uncle to her breast, kisses him, kisses him calmly, and he leads her with the children out of the door.

Like a people defeated and subjugated centuries before, its men and women scattered, their language banned, their tribe scorned, their customs held to ridicule; the men went as slaves into foreign service, let themselves be taken off to foreign wars. And some defected, shone among the foreigners who despised them. Like when young men and women, half-children, emerge covertly among such a people; angrily in private they confront the elders of their people and in secret rooms they say: we've had enough of cowardice, the appeasement that's fed to us, of being insulted and demeaned. They'd give their lives to wipe away the shame. And they go about, distribute leaflets, hold furtive meetings. A stir goes through the people, through every little family, through the young girls who must clean house for foreigners and fall prey to foreign men. And one day it's war. And one day the streets are empty. And one day a flag flies from the rooftops, a new flag. And processions fill the streets, rejoicing in a language – what language – the despised and now victorious language! Everyone weeps behind windows and in the streets. In this hour the dead of lost centuries stir in their graves, flutter in huge swarms to the living from their bare unmarked resting places, to join the jubilant procession. Thousands, thousands sing along, run ahead of the flags and hold the battle-streamers and kiss the muddy boots and caps of the young marchers.

Like these men and women and people, the rocks the mountain ranges the craters ridges the deathly silent ice-covered giant peaks were seized, gripped like a lock by the key, and had to yield. Followed thrumming, and around them everything exploded into light.

Loosened, great Dyngja Herðubreið Tögl Skjald-breiður.

And when with a moan the collapse of the mountains began, and the trains of the assailants sped from the mountains flying span after span over the bridgeworks, already it was too late. The air, still huffing a black and icy breath, splintered red. Heat, ejected boulders. Darkness of deepest black settled on the high plain. Earth shaking rumbling heaving. As they fled, the trains could see in the blackness down below how the brown bespattered snowfields by Snaefell rose and fell, water foaming like a muddy sea. Then the island split from the foot of Herðubreið eastward to the bay of Heraðs-floi. The sandy valley between the two rivers sank. Sea replaced the mile-wide flats of Heraðs-floi all the way to Kverk-fjöll on the edge of mighty Vatna glacier, buried them in a single surge. Swallowed up the trains that tried to reach Heraðs-floi from Kverk-fjöll and Askja. Carried them out to sea along with bridges piles coil-drums railbeds.

The quake continued past Heraðs-floi. Piled up a wall-high miles-wide tidal wave, pushed a hurricane before it, across the leaping ice-grinding sea. It ran east twenty degrees of longitude, burst like thunder into Scandinavian fjords. Black banks of water swept on at enormous speed. Amid the foaming fury, parts of the Faroe Islands sank without a sound. The house-high tidal wave hit the Scottish and Irish coasts, roared into Denmark, backed up in the Elbe estuary spilling into the canal. It surged around Jutland into Kattegat. The shallow Baltic sloshed into the Gulf of Finland. The shrieking ash-spattering whirlwind smashed against Scandinavian mountainsides.

But darkness had abandoned Iceland. The fiery stream emerging from the hearts of Dyngja Herðubreið Askja was not content to consume the vast Odaða plain that stretched north to Skjalfandi Bay. It directed its breath at the icecaps to the west: Hofs-jökull and Lang-jökull. And as their ice dropped into the valleys, heavy basalt loosened by steam erupted over them. They smouldered like Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur. Their heavy tottering peaks collapsed into the chasm opened by the sea.

THE ISLAND SPLITS APART

AT THE MOMENT when the island split apart from Vatna-jökull to Heraðs-floi, men and women on the continent of Europe knew that something monstrous calamitous had happened. At that moment the machines that delivered power to the submarine cables spun free. The cables supplying the expedition had been severed by upthrust seafloor rock, shredded by submarine lava flows. As a bull with its throat slit lies there whipping its tail, still roaring horribly, power bled from the cables across jagged rocks and water. Water welled up milky from the seafloor. Plants medusas fishes were stunned by the current. The cable's death rattle in the deep would not be stilled.

For a day there was deathly calm in the continental townzones. Then the first fliers were spotted on the latitude of Copenhagen. They came, black with the volcanic dust that drifted at great height across Europe, to demand fresh ships planes people. Fear had seized the senates and zone-dwellers when the earthquake and tidal wave hit, when ominous dust sprinkled down endlessly from high above, and day would not break. The envoys knocked back the fear. They gave few details of what had happened. They spoke for Kylas De Barros Prouvas: all three were still alive. Senators were puzzled by the envoys' grim tight-lipped manner. They themselves were ready for battle; the cold gravity of the envoys rather unsettled them.

A fresh flotilla left the Shetland Islands. Sailing over the slag-clotted sea, entering the sulphurous fog off the east coast of Iceland – misty green-yellow flickering mass lying on the ocean – they encountered strange new currents and whirlpools. Along the sixty-fifth parallel, near twelve degrees west, the water became smooth, reefs and cliffs reared from its mirror. They turned east. Heated air currents attacked the sea's uniform chill. They steered miles offshore, plunged north, ploughed cautiously west through constant gritty rain, diverted around an unknown wide upwelling of land that blocked their way like a sandbank. They felt their way warily to the northwest. The island's base had risen irregularly, spread like dunes into the sea. They passed north of unlucky Heraðs-floi. They scanned in vain for remnants of the assault fleet. Crimson flames penetrated the heavy smoke, lit up nights that grew ever longer. Although the moon shone – the envoys travelling with them said it lit up Iceland almost as bright as the sun – darkness thick enough to cut would have lain on them but for the volcanic torchlight. Vapours from the island poured constantly out across the sea.

From the foothills of Langa-nes, the most northeasterly corner of the island, they planned to communicate by code-signals and voice to the mainland, powered by a lightweight cable they had laid behind them. Then they discovered that voice signals could not pass through the altered air. Responding signals failed to reach them; even over a few miles, tests yielded noise and gibberish. This close to the hot ash-eruptions, gouts of volcanic flame, the air swirled with radiation. They had to despatch fliers over open sea, who flew many miles east before they broke through the zone of electrical potential flowing around the island, and identified locations for transmissions to the Continent. The ships cast about for the great severed power-cable, into which power was still being fed from across the ocean. Moving slowly from the south, the search ships groping for the cable located it farther north, followed it to the sandbank they had detoured around. Without warning the power fed into it streamed out over ground. The great cable lay stuck fast throttled broken among abyssal rocks, glowed, guzzled sand. The search ships used their own power to burn it free from the rocks, waited for the rising tide to push it off. Then detoured wide around the island, paid out cable until they came to calm Thistil-fjördur, west of the Langa-nes promontory, where De Barros had gathered the remnants of the fleet.

The newcomers expected a welcome. But they found leaders and crew taciturn as they repaired ships and machines, tallied equipment; exchanges were limited to matters of fact. The faces of these Iceland expeditionaries were completely black, swollen. Minute powdery mineral pigments ejected by the volcanoes had penetrated the uncovered skin of arms hands faces like the Indian ink of a tattooist's needle. Violent inflammations spread. Worst affected were those who in the first days of the assault had flown unprotected through the dust. They lay or stood in the bowels of the ships, groaned in the dark; cheeks foreheads lips swelling thick, eyelids swollen shut. And if any opened their eyes, the corneas were as black as the face, conjunctiva speckled with rock-dust. They dared not blink; every blink ripped the inside of the eyelid; drops of blood gathered at the corners of the eyes.

The new fleet found the island split in an east-west direction from Heraðs-floi to Kverk-fjöll, then on a southwesterly line from Vopna Bay to the Dyngya volcano field. The wedge-shaped fragment in between lay underwater. The volcanoes in the centre of the island all around Odaða-hraun had broken through the basal mountains, were extending their vents on a gigantic scale through rifts pipes explosive dikes. The old craters were levelled. New lava domes rose and sank ceaselessly. Scouts from the earlier fleet ascertained that thicker lava crusts were already spreading over the exposed fires. Fires ran like blood from spurting arteries. The depths of the island and the nearby seas continually flung out new burning masses of rock.

The fleets separated. Old and new expeditionaries were assigned to new mixed crews. A possible extension of the central island fires to the west was called off. The squadron left behind in Thistil-fjördur was tasked to prevent the extruded magma from forming a stronger crust; it maintained access to the fire-field with explosives, monitored the burning land between Myvatn Odaða-hraun and the Vatna glacier.

At the beginning of June the southern fleet led by stern Kylin left the calm of Thistil-fjördur, headed east then turned south. Blond Kylin was hard and silent like the others. If anyone had asked him about his reaction to the clearance of the natives, he wouldn't have known what they were talking about. The flags and bright clothing the newcomers had

brought with them were stowed away. The transporters were silent. On the technical vessels machinery hissed. Masked grimy people went about on the vessels of both fleets. Water they tried to drink in open air turned to mud. Anyone trying to eat a hunk of bread in the open caught a mouthful of sharp volcanic needles. They spat as they ate. Whimpering came from the ships' bowels: the blind with their flayed skins, then those made ill by the sulphurous vapours and dust they had inhaled. They thumped the chest painfully, cough cough, ejected blood with racking rasps. No one spoke of the Continent. They kept a conspiratorial silence.

The southern fleet steamed slowly past, on a level with Heraðs-floi but far beyond the smoke-line from the volcanoes. Taking off their masks they saw the sun rise bright on the horizon, surrounded by a halo. It rose, dazzling gold. Clouds smouldered under it in a riot of colour. They ploughed through the vast steel-grey sea. And did not recognise it. These were not the waters that had brought them here, that they had flung beneath the keels of their ships. They strained their eyes on the water, giant surging monstrosity, tried to penetrate its depths. And kept silent. When spray showered them there was no laughter. They wiped it off, withdrew. Inside the vessels they squatted, men and women who knew how to handle the terrible powers of the machines, dreamed played slept. A leaping fish startled them, made them pensive, short-tempered.

They rounded the island from the east. The fury abated, it was as if they had come behind a great protective wall. A white mass shimmered across from Iceland, rising into clouds that rose vertically away, a great white mass supported on the sea. This was the ice-mountain Vatna: it held at bay all the blackness and din of the volcanoes, no dust crossed its ridge. The vessels of the silent people, heading west, approached the coast through foaming water. The air began to vibrate again. From the bowels of the ships people emerged. Bit their lips as they listened to the distant grumble.

Low indented shore. Yellow sunlight surrounded by murk. A strange alien ruddiness that filled their hearts with wild defiance mingled unfading into the changing colours of the clouds to the northwest. And when darkness fell, only this ominous unsettling red remained in the sky, luring everyone out on deck, ever bigger wider brighter the farther west they came. They clenched their fists when they saw the ruddy glow. They observed the water with a sense of triumph; shivered, tensed up, showed their teeth. A swirling wind off the land drove clouds south, bringing smoke from the fiery hearths.

Night. Now the same deep growl and grumble reached their ears that they had last heard in Thistil-fjördur. Chests tightened; no more smiles; they made themselves small, breathed slowly in and out, so affected were they by the growling. They had almost forgotten it. They were driven by the power of the screw-turning ships and their own will. And driven willingly. But it was no longer a grumbling. There was an explosive upward crack! followed by a downward clatter. A commotion from places unseen along the ruddy horizon. But from time to time this was drowned behind a choking blast that overshadowed everything, hurled ships sea fire-glow into nothingness behind a tumult welling through the ground forever, shaking sea and land for minutes at a time. And when it died away it left sea and land stunned. Crashing raging surf, grey twitching sky. Clinging to the deck among spars stays machine-crates they saw the coast close in on itself, saw land no longer land. The coast, long lines of hills, low beach tumbled into the onrushing sea that reared up tower-high, smashed in a taut black flood-line amid the howling of ripped air.

Then there again was the black bare land. Hills dropped down from its spine, the Earth shook, slid towards the water. The ships turned away seaward. When the night was over they were in the zone of Hekla and Katla, southeastern volcanoes, which came into view only when a sea breeze parted the black smoke. One of the fourteen Vestmann Islands was called Heima-ey; it lay off the Markar River's lake-wide outflow into the sea. Heima-ey was the largest of the islands, covering half a mile square. Once it had been inhabited; shattered cottages lay under rubble, lava bombs; a church stood open to the sky, doors undamaged, roofbeam caved in, the interior a box filled with debris. To the bays of Heima-ey, a few miles off Iceland's south coast, the tall heavy transporters came to seek shelter through the sticky air.

Then light assault craft approached close to the shore. Myrdals-jökull faced them, a swamp-valleyed range eighteen square miles in extent, once hidden beneath an ice-sheet. Myrdal stood there mighty, an awakened volcano. Its ribs gaped, rock torn open on all sides. Steam and pillars of ash spewed out, hiding it. Behind it Katla flamed ominously, often lost in its own thick smoke. There was no need for extensive bridgeworks. They swarmed along the coast, spread inland from the hot ashy smouldering shore. Their goal was the rutting line of volcanoes from the Skafta River at the edge of Vatna's ice, to the Thjorsa River where eight-domed Hekla built its walls and terraces, its countless ravines. The approaching Hercules came not to kill a dragon, dance tirelessly around it lopping off head after head, place his foot on it, slash it to ribbons, fling its bloated entrails in the air. He would entice the monster, mouth after mouth would open wide, neck after neck would lift itself high. It must show him its fury, let him coax away its powers. He held it on a leash, pulled it along behind him. And one morning the transporters set off from tiny Heima-ey, headed out to sea. At the same time the silent eyes of Kylin's apparatus turned towards the mountains.

Hekla, head in the clouds, made a leap as if to plunge into the sea. Its flanks had swelled from within, the flanks of Markhlið, lofty Hilfell Grafell Melfell all were shoved away, came sliding over the burning land. Lake Thoris disappeared. At the same time Katla was toppled. Tungnafell buried the Thjorsa River. When Öraefa-jökull on the edge of Vatna sank down into its own fires and melted, none of the people who had taken the fleet around the island were still on their feet, neither those fleeing out to sea beyond the Vestmann Islands, nor those making their way along the strand. Those on the fleeing ships were hurled against cable-stays, flew across the deck. They were tumbled about along with the spars lines railings to which they clung. The ships gave a sudden jerk forwards, and another, and to the side, like a dog snapping at a dangled treat. Their hindquarters lurched up out of smooth water, screws raced in empty air, bows buried their noses in

the sea. Buried so deep the ships so close to shore that their bodies reared up askew almost vertical, tipped sideways and forwards, people barrels spars tumbling around them. Under pressure of the torn air the sea heaved more slowly, lapped broadly at the land, hung heavy heavy over the deep. Foaming whitecaps were swept away. Blown back from shore, the sea pulled itself together like a serpent, swelled giant-high; as darkness fell it swept to land, a shadow through the night, seethed against cliffs denuded beaches, wide crawling streams of lava; flooded over them, dispersed spent, let them be, gathered itself again, and embracing rubble boulders gravel ashes it rose up looming higher higher to break crashing in a boiling surge over the drooling land.

The people who had come here from the swarming towns of Europe to capture fire from volcanoes sailed along the coast with their magical apparatus, cunning machinery assembled in silence, turned eastward the moment pillars of fire ceased to rise from the volcanic rift. Now, as a primordial din resounded from the firmament, their fragile ships, shaped from steel and wood, were spun and spun about. The little tumbling human creatures flung themselves at the flight-ready aircraft despatched from the European continent. They flew seawards in the tiny toiling machines out over the ships' sides, east towards the solid unmoved icecap of Vatna. As they swept over the water they felt something grab them by the neck, sideways backwards. In a flash they were crumpled, flung like balls in the air, spun high in a shimmer of hot rattling stones. Squashed by the red glowing cheeks of the bombs, nibbled holed by sharp grit.

Many crashed onto Vatna-jökull, their desired goal, still fastened to their merrily whirring machines. The wrenched pummelled bodies were driven into the blue-white ice of the glacier, fur-gloved hands through which a tremor still ran, wide-open eyes, and ears that after this primordial din would hear nothing more. Ice rebounded under the shock of these human visitors slamming onto it like a storm of artillery fire. The visitors, squashed to a bloody ball, dug a deep groove, came to rest. Stones ashes packed them in. From bridgeworks, five thousand human creatures brought forth by Europe had seen the volcano Laki, the mountains Katla Hekla grow surrounded by stony rain, grow, spread, grow, heave up, burst: all were devoured by the fire. As the night around was shredded by a reflected glow harsher than the light of a nearby sun, they lay for long seconds about their machines, clenched and crumpled, bent in on themselves. No longer needed their muscles. Swirled like pillars of steam along with piles bridge-sections coil-drums railbed railtracks. Their thoughts, their human existence snatched by the fire, their physicality stripped bare, three seconds later no different from vaporising lava: steam carbon dioxide, burning calcium.

In that moment when the heavens bathed sea ships bridgeworks human creatures in its rage and furious transformations, the land, responding to the question posed by the vast glow, became a sea of fire. The sea flowed from the line of the Thjorsa River to the Laki fissures on the east, and north to flaming Trölla-dyngja. Engulfed in flames was Hekla, blanketing five hundred square miles with its eternal snows and areoles of black slag-walls, rising in five lines of hills, six terraces, cliff-walls along the Ytri-Ranga, Markhlið, behind it loftier Bjölfell Melfell Grafell the main ridge, brown eroded gorges. Rauðu-kambar on the Thjorsa's right bank sunken away. The cap of Myrdals-jökull. Dreadful Eyafjalla-jökull.

Once a witch threw herself into Katla. Then the volcano erupted, melted all the glacier ice. The land below the Katla glacier was fertile, cattle grazed, little ponies stepped through fords, shook dry, rolled in sand. First the mountain had created its masses of sand and pumice and the black dead landscapes, Myrdal Sands, Kötli Sands. Then hot rivers of mud bubbled down, and finally the ice itself was loosened, scraped over the hills to the south and lurched into the sea. Katla engulfed in flames, fjords bays lakes steamed, filled with flooding ice-melt.

The fire covered two degrees of latitude, smoked from Skjalfandi Bay to the southern foothills by Myrdals-jökull. Fiery monsters licked at mighty Vatna in the east, their breath reached the east coast where the Jökla and Lagar rivers had been drowned by the sea.

FUGITIVES

AS THE BURSTS and squalls of the air died away, as waters gurgled and slopped in all directions, the command ships that had been driven south launched flares and colour signals across the sea. The signals glowed amid the hail of stones, the heavy shadows of ash clouds. In vain. Heading farther out to sea in search of the fleet, sending up more flares into the brightening air they saw a cluster of ships approaching from the south. They were informed by this flotilla that only a few vessels had been spotted to the west, badly damaged by boulders and making heavy weather. The leaders ordered them to maintain contact, and sped on south, furious at the losses. Sent fliers on ahead. After a short search these reported a whole flotilla steaming in line ahead of them, now changing course to the southwest.

A second report: these are undamaged ships from the fleet, transporters and technical vessels. The leaders and fliers tried to communicate to the fleeing ships with signal flares and sirens that they should heave to and establish contact with the leaders. They made no response, continued at full speed. The command ships sent up their most experienced pilots, who crossed the ships' path a few minutes later and risked landing on the moving vessels.

The pilots had instructions to find out what was happening, convey orders from the leaders, and report back. They never returned. The ships maintained course and speed. A solo pilot, ordered by the dismayed leaders to fire a signal rocket if anything appeared suspicious on the breakaway flotilla, gave no sign for a long hour after his arrival, then a signal flared. The vessels were indeed fleeing.

The leaders convened on De Barros' ship. Stocky De Barros surveyed conditions on his own fleet. All, men and women alike, were stunned with horror. They stood about, wept, lay in apathy, crawled into their cabins, trembled with mouths agape. A small number were alert, whispered constantly together. When it was confirmed that the vessels were fleeing, they declared they mustn't escape, the fugitives must be brought back. Prouvas, as calm as the other leaders, applied arguments he had used during the disaster in Heraðs-floi, and then some: the task shall be completed, they shall not give up. He heard them out one after the other; examined himself; their words seemed overdone and not quite right. He did not tremble, found he was determined not to yield, but something was left unspoken. Better was a word from one of the men: he would not flee the fires, would go back to them. That was something. De Barros gave angry orders: the southern flotilla must not escape to Europe. They were far out in the ocean, had left behind the zone of smoke and ash. It would be possible to use the communications vessels to the east – the base for reports back to the Continent – to contact the fleet in Thistil-fjördur, provide a soothing account, request their help to catch and quarantine the fugitive vessels. As they ploughed on, there before them lay one of the enormous transporter ships of the fugitives, leaking and about to sink. Its captain signalled: don't pursue us, the crew scuttled it themselves. De Barros crossed to the vessel. The demoralised had the upper hand. They behaved like drunks. No one here wept. They turned from the newcomers or stared expressionless. Some were minded to attack anyone who spoke to them, touched them. Many stood grinning, some gaped. Companionways and decks stank; heaps of fresh yellow-brown human ordure lay everywhere, the people stank of ordure. Some stood in pools of urine, squatted in it, urine ran from their trousers, over their shoes. De Barros asked who had scuttled the ship. The captain closed his eyes: "I did. And others."

"Why?"

"No other way."

De Barros stepped closer: "No other way? There is a way. Look at me." The young man would not open his eyes. "I don't want to, don't want to." De Barros was impelled to put his arms around him: "But you will."

"No, I don't want to, I can't take it any more. Not again."

"But we can all take it. Tell me you can."

De Barros made no headway with the stupefied almost brutish man. He must take care not to be felled, like his pilot earlier. He held the captain's arm: "You had a blow to the head. It'll all be better. Don't look down." The terrified captain went with him.

Most of the fugitive vessels were now far ahead, planning to make contact with the voice stations in Scandinavia and the Continent. De Barros sent assault ships in hot pursuit. They fired warnings: "Surrender!" Angrily De Barros urged the pursuers on. More warning signals. And at this moment the deathly tired bewildered people on the fleeing ships saw the calm sea that was taking them to peace rise up against them. There was a pattering on the surface of the water; the grey sky behind lit up. A blinding flash. Horror of the volcanoes still in their blood, they saw a wide black mass of cloud cross the water, avid to enshroud them. The sea, just now their refuge, was stirred noisily by De Barros' fleet; the clouds descending on the surface raced black, drove foam before them. The sea that buoyed them now tried to shake them off. The fugitive vessels sped into thick darkness. Endured vertical moaning waterspouts. De Barros' scout ships slipped through the roaring darkness, cast light around them. Within an hour the flotilla was taken. Hundreds of their crew leaped headfirst into the sea. Several ships sank before they could be secured.

They turned back to the northwest. Whimpering from the captured ships. The noise from the recalcitrants fettered below decks led De Barros to heave to on the open sea and board the raving vessels with a handful of men and women. He had to throw a number of embittered people overboard. He instructed junior officers to restore order. The weeping fearful people were tied together in groups and taken off to two designated transporter ships. These sailed in the middle of the convoy, flying white flags.

They were back in the glowing angry zone. In mounting excitement they sailed along the east coast of Iceland. They knew the price they had paid for the last assault; now they wanted to know the profit. The main parts of both fleets gathered quietly on the north coast. Those who had kept behind paid no attention to the two white-flagged ships peeling away to shelter in a fjord. And as they exchanged news from ship to ship, a message reached them from the Norwegian coast: several hundred cargo planes are on their way with reinforcements. And more: another fleet is leaving port.

The continental townzones were dismayed and bewildered by the alarm calls they had picked up from the fugitives. Senates assumed that the leaders were all dead. Terse reports from the northern fleet under Kylin put them right; all they needed was more people and materiel. Relieved yet hesitant, they provided these. No one knew what was happening there. Lurid half-invented rumours about the Iceland venture spread far and wide. More and more of those who had fled the towns gathered expectantly in the main centres. The senates themselves had a feeling that despite all the losses, the events in the north must surely surpass any rumour. But the tremulous cries of those fleeing the Icelandic fleets had paralysed them, and they were even more anxious to know how the leaders and foot soldiers of the expedition would behave. Secretly they hoped these too would be carried off, the dangerous silence would end with everything swept away. Then came the signals from the northern fleet, doggedly carrying on. The new fleet set out. Senates became taciturn.

At news of the relief ships De Barros gave orders to hand the white-flagged vessels over to him, prevent any contact between them and the newcomers; and then: he has no interest in those two ships. The junior officers understood the danger posed by the demoralised lamenting mad jeers cries. Guards were withdrawn from the vessels. One night both ships were gone from Thistil-fjördur, never heard of again.

TOURMALINE

TOURMALINE was the name given to a family of mineral species contained in the cavities and veins of coarse-grained granite. Some took up magnesium and became brown Dravite; iron turned them to pitch black Schorl; Achroite varieties containing sodium were yellow pale green. They were lodged in the Albany granite, in New Hampshire, on top of Dartmoor in England. Boron Silicic acid had settled and spread in them. When water steam gases penetrated to these creatures they metamorphosed into bright mica, outgrew the sapphire. The long pillar-like striped members of these species could be recognised when they emerged from dikes in rock, bent dented brittle broken, a pyramid at each end of the body. They had gathered in the rock in the form of rays; often they sat together with the families Topaz and Quartz. They were peculiarly sensitive and excitable. Heat caused them to set up an electrical vibration, as people had long observed; current flowed from the ends of their bodies.

The idea arose of using Tourmaline to turn heat – loose dispersed transient energy – into the more stable energy of electricity. In Texas Brazil, in the British Isles, townzones had quarried rocks for the Greenland expedition, blown up dikes in granite, piled stocks of Tourmaline for processing at Mons in Belgium. The crushed stone was cleaned, the separated minerals smelted, crystallised. They were spun into weblike forms. Populations of Tourmaline hung creature by creature swinging elastically side by side in slender stacks; exotic minerals separated crystal from crystal. These were the creations that would suck in the radiant volcanic fires, transform their heat into electric current that would later be exhaled over Greenland as dispersed heat once again. Web after web was extruded at Mons. Stocks of crushed rock from granite dikes were drawn down. The elastic dappled crystal webs were loaded into the holds of giant ships. Enough to contain all the fires of Earth's surface.

In the freighters sailing for Iceland they hung free. A bifurcated rift cleaved the remnants of Iceland. They came up from the south to Trölla-dyngja, lay to along the Skjalfanda to the north, level with Kverk-fjöll in the east. Where Krafla and Leir-hnjúkur had stood, eight-domed Hekla in the south, terrible Katla, a sea of fire now raged. Gouts of flame shot at intervals from explosive vents along the rims. The exposed mass showed a regular rise and fall; it pulsed, rocked with groans, rent its new stone armour, sprayed lava, spattered back into the Earth laying open black chasms. On the surface white balls of steam jogged, seethed ponderously yellow-red yellow-brown like molten metal. Along with the steam-balls, glowing lumps of lava danced on the fire-sea. They skidded a while across the occluded mirror, south and north. Then as they slid left and right they became jammed in place, became thicker higher, rose up like mountains; the whole fire-sea trembled, the island's floor swayed. The fire-sea rose like a blister under the white steam mountain. It grew tumultuous, flying stones whipped into one another. Their clear sounds became overlain by a rumbling, shaking, organ-deep grumbling. The steamy mass split with a thunderous roar, was flung across the fire-sea and the mountains of the island. Lava gushed from the trunk-like hole in the upthrust sea; it soared pillars and trees, spread like a fan. Billowing flames played with little white clouds, sank back down.

The fleets at Thistil-fjördur in the north and Myrdals-jökull in the south, the freighters with the Tourmaline, were unable to approach the surface of the fiery sea because of the flying bombs, explosions of gas and lava. Squadrons of planes were sent across from all sides, at first carrying nothing, then criss-crossing with spread webs of Tourmaline. Squadrons set off from Rifstangi in the north, from Vopna Bay in the east, in the region of former Herðubreið, from which masses of rubble were sliding into the fire. The pilots suffered terrible losses, but no one saw a reason to give up. Men and women pushed themselves into action; the losses were painful but they accepted them almost greedily. Expeditionaries old and new were welded together in one sentiment. The webs could not be anchored to the heaving ground, the exploding cratering sea; they had to be towed as near the surface as possible. They tore, tumbled in and melted, plunged in along with the fliers.

Now parts of the fire-sea were changing their appearance in disconcerting ways. The volcanoes, previously a single brimming basin of fire, built walls of slag between them, piled up ramparts. It seemed that remnants of the old volcanoes were lurking in the depths and meant to rebuild their bodies. The incursion field around Myvatn was already a hazy outline. Incalculable streams of lava were pouring across the land. They welled black-blue in the murky daylight, lit the night with a white glow. They came to rest in stony sacks that they cast about them. Units of the Thistil squadron blew the sacks apart, injected gases under the crust to release glowing lava. And as the streams welled in bands miles wide over which more streams piled several houses high, raising the ground level in the flow zone, the squadrons equipped themselves with squall-bombs to protect their backs from ashes and boulders, and with vaporising ice-masks.

They installed a grid of pylons along the Skjalfanda to the south, over Hofs-jökull, parallel to the Thjorsar River near ruined Hekla. A second line of pylons was installed on the western glacier slope of the Vatna massif, north across Kverk-fjöll down to where the sea had flooded the Lagar valley all the way to Heraðs-floi. A third line of pylons ran in an arc from Öxar-fjord in the north to the region of Myvatn, past Dyngju-fjöll, Herðubreið. A dense ring of pylons all around the fire-sea.

Now began the dreadful death-defying task: over the vaporous leaping mass, the boiling sea, squadrons had to trail webs and drape them on the pylons. It must be done in a flash, waiting in each place for just the right moment to dash from the west across to the pylons on Vatna and Kverk-fjöll. The draped twinkling webs of crystal hung house-high over the magma sea. Below them people from the old northern fleet, spurting squalls all about them, moved to protect the webs, blasting away and softening the grey creamy scale that the white and yellow streams of current brought to the surface.

And already the webs with the Tourmaline beings were dipping from the pylons like seagulls aiming at fish in transparent surface waters, jerked stretched swelled high with a crackle, were lifted from the pylons and towed seawards, bounding over cold land and onto ships while new squadrons took off to repeat the operation. Ash and gases rose from the fiery abyss in rutting heat, white clouds pearled on it like drips of sweat, were shredded by the squalls.

Beyond the lines of pylons they had erected hangars to receive the charged Tourmaline. The voltage in the charged webs was so strong that the first planes to swoop down unearthed crashed with them crippled into the sea. The webs lost a fraction of their charge in those few minutes crossing cold ground. So heat was provided by networks of wires over which the webs were trailed as they flew; the network smoked on contact with the charged webs. The hangars had to be erected very close to the volcanoes. Here the webs crackled with the energy coursing through them, pinged and buzzed. In the hangars they were stacked in a sluggish lemon-yellow fluid in giant tubs. The stacks were transparent down to the floor of the tubs, opalescent; blisters big as apples rose slowly through them. Heavy billowing streaks laid themselves like knitting yarn around each suspended web. When it was lifted from the hot thick oily bath, all its mesh was encased in grey-yellow, vitrified. It no longer buzzed; you could safely touch it, stroke the sticky drape.

Freighters arrived regularly with new shipments of Tourmaline from the continent, across the vast Atlantic waters. They were encased in the wind's singing, sounds of splashing, distant murmurs. Ploughed through cloud-fluttering air, stormy petrels herring gulls with serrated tails plunging alongside. The sea fell away two miles below. It was filled with fish algae medusas slimy creatures. Its tides ebbed and flowed. Ships rocked in its glittering flashing.

THE CONTINENT WANTED SOME

THE CONTINENT wanted some of the charged nets. Brussels and London hit on the same idea simultaneously. They were searching for new means of power, feared that the Iceland expeditionaries would appropriate the webs, which were unfamiliar to them but seemed dangerous. They despatched trusted people with every new ship to inventory the charged webs and report on their location. When the Continent demanded some, Kylin De Barros Wollaston refused point blank. The senates, more uneasy now, revealing nothing publicly, commissioned new leaders to obtain webs for them. A strongly equipped squadron appeared off Iceland. De Barros managed to lead it astray for a whole day. He threatened the new leaders. The Iceland fleet got wind of what was happening; they supported Kylin and De Barros. The naïve newcomers heard fierce insults directed at the senates; leaders and crew were uninhibited in their contempt, even for the townzones themselves. The envoys were bewildered, failed to understand who they were dealing with. They reported back; the senates directed them to help load the webs and then quit Iceland, meanwhile gave Kylin and De Barros to understand that if they ignored decisions of the senates they would no longer be supplied. Kylin and De Barros gave way, bitterly. Only later did it dawn on them that the townzones might be afraid of them. They were astonished, and it became clear how remarkable it was that they should be astonished. Maybe the senates had good reason to be afraid. Who were they, these alien senates and townzones that had sent them to this place.

When Kylin stood at the entrance to his tent-house and watched through the billowing smoke as the first new fliers from the townzones set about the pylons with their webs and squalls, tears came to his eyes. The veterans felt besmirched. The tempo increased. The two fleets avoided contact. Dangerous hostilities were visited on the newcomers. The old fleets had already loaded their vessels with the enormous quantities of Tourmaline they needed; lying idle off the roaring island they watched the newcomers, wrestled through to a decision. One day they destroyed the pylons, destroyed the hangars with the insulation tubs, drove the newcomers away, chased them and their ships out to sea. There was no desire to fight back against the embittered expeditionaries. In Copenhagen Hamburg the senates welcomed the returning fleets with hypocritical equanimity. They thanked the leaders for their efforts, laughed at the complaints against de Barros, expressed extraordinary delight at the prepared webs they brought with them. They spread word that junior officers had mishandled relations with Kylin and de Barros, but no matter: the mysterious webs were in their

hands. Now their powers could be studied. By indirect means word was allowed to reach the Iceland fleet that the senates had managed through their own processes to isolate a remarkable power in the Tourmaline they had acquired. The senates' physicists and technologists had in reality thrown themselves at the charged crystal webs to see if anything dangerous lurked within them.

But the Iceland fleet paid little attention to rumours from the continent. Ships from all the fleets headed around the menacing cloud-shrouded island for the Rifstangi peninsula in the north. It was from Rifstangi across grimy Svalbard that the first assault on the island had advanced over bridgeworks. Each ship sent out small boats full of people around the cliffs. A memorial service for those sacrificed in the assault was held on a snowfield on ash-strewn Svalbard. After Kylin spoke, brown fur hat pressed to his face against swirling grit, two thousand people knelt in the snow. They clutched at the ashes under them, felt around in the snow. Many clenched their fists when they remembered the two sad cruel vessels that had flown white flags. They dreamed in silence.

Heads down, hands linked, they trudged back to the boats. And slowly, with one accord, the ships circumnavigated the island. Thistil-fjord came, where a fleet had long lain at anchor, the foothills of Langa-nes, Vopna-fjord, volcanoes shook the ground, black swirling giant whirlwinds, spirals flecked with red flung up from below. Here the sandbank stretching to the east; they had to detour around it; the disaster in Heraðs-floi had hurled them back. The island appeared again; bays and foothills, the ice-giant Vatna rising wide and radiant from the sea, the smouldering deserted south coast, little dead islands, the west coast, and again Rimar mountain, Myrkarr-jökull in the north, the bay of the Skjalfanda River hidden in steam, the Rifstangi peninsula, Thistil-fjord. They sailed past mountain passes, long ridges, the wind carried nothing across, the volcanic roar was muffled. Often they veered out to sea, the seafloor seemed to lift and steam. Lava streams kept them from the land. Ever and again they approached the island, eager excited enthralled.

PART SEVEN:
GREENLAND

TO GREENLAND

RELUCTANTLY the ships pulled away from Iceland, very slowly entered the mighty waters of the Atlantic. Their ears still rang with that deep abysmal booming, like a seashell pressed to the ear. They sailed the same open sea which months ago, endless long months, they had crossed from the Shetland Islands to the 60th parallel. The sea that battered coastlines with shingle and sand, Ocean, wide hundred-mile water, dark wave-dappled being, set in motion by tenuous breezes and overflown by creatures flapping mewing. Once, ships had left behind Muckle Roe and Foula, Mainland, the craggy isles of Yell, Samphyra, Uyea, Unst, wheeling bird-islets receding. Their big bleak searching eyes saw the sun again, that unchained Fire, incinerating Hell of everything that crawls flies hops, white seething sea of flame, hurling metallic clouds that fall back as slag. Metals that chirp, firebreath upon firebreath, primal beings blooming free, Helium Manganese Calcium Strontium.

They stumbled between deck and cabin, sniffed the cold nor'easter blowing up, gazed wondering at the waves. Memories unclear of what had been left behind. They came from Brussels London, city-states in the south; were brought together there. Flung bridgeworks across Iceland. Towns, they remembered towns. What strange people those Settlers are. It's for them we were sent here. The sea that flows down there; good that it flows. They had no desire for towns. How strangely coloured it all was: senates townzones factories machines. Marduk the great tyrant fought in the Marches; Zimbo came after him. The zones yielded to the Settlers; that's why we were sent here, to Iceland, Greenland. What sort of people are they back there. Hear nothing. Keep on across the sea. Greenland, to Greenland.

The Arctic Middle Sea lay in two deep basins. Between Spitsbergen and Greenland the Arctic Basin reached a depth of three miles. A broad underwater ridge running barely three hundred yards below the surface, Thomson Ridge, divided the Arctic basin from the Atlantic Ocean. From eastern Greenland the ridge ran to Iceland. To the northeast the ridge separated the Arctic deep from the basin around the New Siberian Islands. Following the east coast of Greenland at a distance, the ships of the townzones sailed through icy seas. The warm tropical Gulf Stream with the ocean behind it sent its waters up against Iceland, curled around the island, flowed past the southern tip of Greenland. Alongside it, over it from north and east flowed the East Greenland Current carrying driftwood and ice; the frigid Labrador Current came from the west to merge with it; both flowed high above silent abyssal deeps.

And suddenly all became aware of the Tourmaline vessels, the floating cargo that had come among them. The bowels of the ships were packed full of webbing charged with heat from the volcanoes, snatched hurriedly from raging huffing plains of fire. Dear roaring Iceland sailed with them. Eight-domed Hekla, lava spilling from the Thjorsa River down to a hissing sea. Ships of the Myvatn flotilla sailing with the fleet had named the group of Tourmaline carriers after the volcanoes from which they had drawn their power. There was the Leir-hnjúkur Class. Broad-shouldered Herðubreið, terrible Dyngja. Katla, gigantic Öraefa on the southern edge of Vatna glacier. There seems, the people thought, to be some reluctance in these webs to travel to Greenland, to give away this life and blood, spread it over the land at the behest of the townzones. Herðubreið Katla Hekla Myvatn were sailing with them, had been placed under their protection. None of the leaders suspected that some of those who sailed with them down the south-flowing East Greenland Current had a notion to shield the Tourmaline vessels with their love, that they meant to blow open the cargo holds. The Tourmaline-class vessels sailed in a long line, guarded by personnel transports. Smaller vessels broke a passage for them through pack-ice. They steered cautiously past icebergs. Always there were boats from every ship swarming about the Tourmaline carriers, always near at hand like the hands of a nursemaid.

Then, after a week of aimless sailing, the sudden order: prepare all machines, spread out systematically all around Greenland from Melville Land above eighty degrees north to Cape Farewell below sixty degrees. They were to pass along Denmark Strait in the east, and up Baffin Bay in the west to Ellesmere Island. There was a further order: assign a few guard ships to the Tourmaline vessels; no one is to approach too close to the great freighters.

Those who wanted to scuttle the freighters thought at first they had been caught out. They soon saw that something else had nudged the leaders to these precautions. As the hulls laden with volcanic heat pressed steadily on through the water, they began to acquire remarkable company. Not far out of Iceland the crews of escort and guard vessels had noticed great numbers of fish shoaling around the fleet. They thought: it must just be the track we're following. Two or three days later they noticed that the fish were showing special interest in the Tourmaline vessels. Brown seaweed clung to the hulls, resisted the action of waves. When ice floes shaved part of the bow clear, new clumps of seaweed appeared almost at once as if drawn by a magnetic force, seemed almost to spring forth from the massive hull. The Tourmaline freighters wore the seaweed like trailing beards. When they slowed, the hulls were surrounded by a wide fringe of brown green grey vegetation. The screws shuddered and shook their blades free; but the plants gained entry to the long shaft tunnels, invaded dark narrow channels deep into the enormous vessels, wound around the heavy smoothly spinning steel shafts. Men had to go down to the freezing spaces, hack away with hooks and knives the growth that threatened to smother the ships. They hauled heavy streamers up on deck, past the astonished crew. These were not gelatinous filaments of the delicate algae that floated in the waves below, dense as meadowgrass, colouring the sea olive-green. Rather they were arm-thick shrubbery, many-branched, equipped with sharp teeth inches long; they produced berries big as apples that served as swim-bladders; these lifted like heads. Cleaning details set to work on every freighter. They had to push heaps of algae from ladders with brooms, beat them from spars with sticks.

All around the Tourmaline ships, as if summoned by signal-call or smell, whales swam, kept the freighters company, broke the surface with a wavelike arcing motion, pushed blindly past the escort ships. You saw them swimming with open maw, propelled by rapid strokes of the tail fin. Scythe-shaped curving long narrow teeth by the hundred, honey-yellow in the great jaws; water swept between the teeth into the throat, sprayed in a fountain from the black skull's blowhole. Seething of dark shiny backs, water spouting high. The timid creatures followed the transports with grim determination. When boats from the escort vessels set out with harpoons that they had made for fun, the creatures slipped away. But when the boats tried to block them from the freighters, they let rip with angry sweeping tails.

During these days the lighting and communications equipment on the freighters degraded. Engineers understood that the disturbance must lie in the volcano ships themselves. No heat was leaking from the mountains of mineral webbing. People went down into the holds where webs hung across the whole width. The oily insulation was nowhere defective. Other substances, unknown, were being radiated. At night the volcano ships glowed dimly, sailed in a haze; lamps flickered went out for hours at a time. Then the leaders, uneasy now, ordered an end to aimless cruising; everything must be made ready for the assault on Greenland.

But the volcano ships, pitching heavily through wastes of ice, were touched by a spell. They seemed to want to sink into the ice. A night of slow sailing was enough to secure a vessel to the sea as if with hawsers. Scraped-off floating dying seaweed came to life again, put out new stems and leaves. The edges of ice floes were overrun by these algal populations, which sent long stalks and organs like palm-leaves up a ship's sides, clamped it to the ice. The freighters were freed with fire and explosives.

People on the freighters and nearby were strangely distracted. Soon it became impossible to draft people onto the Tourmaline ships. After less than a day they went about in lethargy, a kind of trance that no amount of movement and washing could ward off. Like opium smokers they sat here, sat there, plodded laboriously about their tasks. It became hard for them to move the face. The mask-like expressions were a symptom of the condition: internally they were sweetly moved, kept gazing through ladders doors through walls and decks, up to the sky, saw landscapes of toppling trees, clouds stretching long, warm drops falling on their body, their lips; they licked, swallowed. A violent, quickly irresistible libidinous feeling ran through them. Men trembled in a chill of passion, women shook themselves, went slowly twitching. Every limb was filled with lust, every movement brought frenzy nearer. They embraced, and when they had mingled their bodies and uncoiled again they remained unsatisfied. They kissed cuddled ropes, rubbed and bumped arms and legs and torsos against ladders. Huge algal stalks reared over the rails; they hauled them in, it was these they desired. Blissful whimpering, desperate sighs, anxious inconsolable groans. Then they laughed again, let go of themselves and everything, went about their work in a daze. But spittle drooled from them, such a soft twisting behind the forehead, the head was flung back. In order to continue through the ice, by the end of the second day people had to be forcibly taken off the freighters. All inessential crew left the volcano ships. The fleets plunged through the ocean towards their designated targets.

Now at night you could see with the naked eye what lay inside the giant volcano freighters. When the sun went down and lights glimmered from the other ships, the vessels Hekla Leir-hnjúkur Dyngja Katla Myvatn, on which no lamps burned, sailed as if sheathed in a pale glow. You could make out the whole extent of the vessels down to the keel in the dark water; a delicate white light shimmered on screws spars lines, on dense encroaching vegetation. The intensity of the emanation grew hour by hour. In the dark you saw water lit up for many feet around the ships. Personnel transports and escort vessels left an ever-widening gap between them and the floating warehouses; small teams risked crossing to them for no more than a few hours at a time. Everyone was nervous. They lay around, conscience-stricken. What to do? What should be done with the terrible volcano-holds dragging along behind them, looming over them like monsters? No one thought now of blowing them up. They begged the leaders to ram the Tourmaline freighters into pack ice, and flee. But what would happen to the webs. Maybe the energy stores would melt, drift south on the current, the insulation might break down; they might send fearsome beings of fire and radiation against the continents. We must be done with them, but cannot abscond. On to Greenland. And leaders and crew shuddered at what was to come, how it would unfold.

On they sailed. Shoals of fish flashed metallic in the water. Salmon blue-grey with dark waggling fins. Schools of mackerel-pike, pursued by tuna and leaping chasing bonito. It seemed the meadow-plants of the seafloor had torn free and floated up to cling to the hulls. Their live weight impeded the progress of the Tourmaline freighters, but they seemed not to notice. The bow lifted ever higher out of the spraying ocean, slid at night through the water like a glowing living creature pursued by the rest of the vessel; it seemed to be readying itself to take flight across the sea. In an inexplicable manner, causing alarm in the accompanying fleets, the volcano ships towered over the rest. The bow, the exposed hull slid smoothly over the sea's surface as if on rails. The keel would surely soon reach the waterline, screws would spin free in air.

And as the vessels loomed mountain-high over the rest of the fleet, their bodies began to buckle. The ships reared up savage, rutting. A raging clattering around them, the engine in their bowels laboured, a dauntless crew, relieved hourly, kept them working, bit back all fear. The stringy stalks of weed that lay over decks and spars were torn in two by the onrushing vessels. They shrugged off the ice that snuggled up to them, welded itself to them. For miles around the freighters seabirds swarmed; they pounced on the structures, sat on creeping algae, scratched mewing twittering screaming at the stalks and leaves that blanketed the hull. Great northern divers in their thousands, screaming shrilly, flapped on wires ropes, through hatches deck-windows, covered companionways with their twitching feathered bodies, hopped unhelpfully about, clustered thickly around the hull. Jostling speeding fish forced them aloft, spouts from whales'

blowholes sent them whirling into the air. Birds rode the wind over from icy Greenland.

These were not ships now. They were mountains, meadows. And the ships crackled. Crackled with the same sound the webs had emitted when the flier-squadrons hauled them up from Iceland's sea of fire. The clear even sound rang eerily through the beat of wings the cawing twittering, hissed softly gently like steam from a turbine's nozzles.

The land they sought between longitudes thirty and forty west was out of sight. A thick barrier of ice had gathered in front of it. From the direction in which it lay came a biting chill and ever more new white ice. Bright glassy ice pushed across the ocean's surface in blocks floes crags. The closer the fleets came to the east or west coast of the Greenland continent, the taller the icebergs they had to evade. These drifted white and blue from the unseen coasts. Pack-ice came humped and jagged, speeded by northerly gales. Floes twisted about grinding crashing, piled up atop each other, overturned, sloshed up and down in open water. Mountains and battlements approached, tall towers of floes jammed together. They gleamed out of the night. The same water that had made them washed high over them, dripped off them. It poured in torrents, cut deep crevasses. They moved like creatures of fable through the twilight, icicles hung arm-long from their balconies, chinked glassily; suddenly a fragile gallery would fall with a crash onto heaving floes.

The seafarers sought Greenland. As they trailed in the wake of the leaping ramming icebreaker auxiliaries they were already in that land's realm: these were advance parties of the icecap. Like a lush ancient tree that year after year bears its fruit, apples emerging always new out of the soil, out of the same trunk, formed and born of the same being, so did Greenland lie on the black water behind the twilight, thousands of miles wide, pregnant. Ice grew on it, the land did not tremble; out of its abundance, in silence, masses slid into the sea.

Then to the west behind the great ice barrier the coast appeared, wild Alpine land. The fjords dark water-mirrors; black peaks. From every height glaciers crept into the depths of rocky defiles. Pyramids of ice soared over mountain crests. Forked valleys filled with white rubble. A flotilla pulled into Gael Hamkes Bay at the 74th parallel, in panicked terror of the Tourmaline freighters they were escorting. They were consumed by a furious notion that they must flee from these vessels. Rid themselves of the Tourmaline at any cost.

Clavering Island lay in the bay, craggy and glacier-covered like the mainland. Onto the rocky floor of the coast the people, demented now, welded lightweight poles and pylons. On cliffs around the shallow coastal waters they laid auxiliary girders. They flung the crystal webs from their ships over the pylons poles girders, at once set fire to the emptied ships. They were like murderers with blood on their hands, and their only recourse is to hack off their fingers. Feverishly they spread plates beneath the webbing to take up the electrical potential; fell over one another to splice conductors from the great cable the fleet was hauling behind it. Within a single night current flowed from the cable over the plates. The insulation around the webs melted. White-red flash. Earth-shattering thunder. The island flung up white clouds, steam glowed red from below; it shot up wildly in endless gusts. Installations destroyed, pylons and girders all melted. Torn webbing scattered askew across the glacier, eating into it.

The glacier did not lie still: crevasses opened, the webs sank into the depths. The glacier lurched over them; ice steamed. But then two mountain peaks bent their heads to the webbing, already shredded by the warmed slipping blocks of glacier ice. And as they spread their arms over the smouldering humming crystals down into the cloudy stew, plunging onto the webbing like a wrestler onto the body of his felled opponent, the crystals burst smashed asunder. The mountain masses began to slide as if something living lay under them. They crushed the crackling tatters of webbing beneath them, rolled shoved collapsed upon themselves. With a crash they gaped open over the buried defunct webbing; steam spouted as from a chimney. Hour after hour a white and black haze of smelted particles hissed over the island in writhing plumes. The maddened teams from the nearby flotilla were hurled with their ships across the bay, onto cliffs, jammed between ice-floes.

Around the same time, a panic seemed to seize all the fleets. Despite the sobering outcome of the events in Gael Hamkes Bay, on many ships they set urgently about similar acts of violence. There were reports of certain flotillas turning back, attempted advances on the mainland being routed. De Barros Kylin Wollaston remained stone-faced; they appeared among the crews, who were looking to halt operations. Persuasive enchanting women went with them around the fleets, importuned the desperate: "Think of Myvatn, of Herðubreið. Think what you've already achieved and overcome, what lies behind you. We shan't give up. None of us shall give up. We shan't be defeated. You shall not forget who you are." Sobbing people swallowed, gritted their teeth. A terrible time endured, until the arrival of the oil-cloud ships.

OIL-CLOUDS

AT THE gathering-grounds of the European fleets, the Shetland and Faroe Islands, the idea first came which enabled the continuation of the expedition and the wider use of Tourmaline webbing. Here in the laboratories on the technical ships toiled men who had inherited the ideas of Angela Castel of the March, inventor of the smoke-blower weapon. She was

the first to develop on a large scale sluggish clouds with which she enveloped and pinned down large armies. Castel's black heavy violet smoke-clouds lacked viscosity; they dispersed after a while, had no buoyancy. She had struggled to no avail to make the smoke-mass compact enough to suffocate shrouded pinned-down enemy units. Now, during these weeks when western physicists biologists chemists went about in gloom, depressed by the sombre events on Iceland, dangerous news from the fleets, the idea of sluggish smoke was advanced significantly by the Londoner Holyhead, who would soon vanish from sight. Driven by certain impulses he managed to find the specific mix that would move like a gas through air, stay tenaciously intact like gelatine, and fill space with its own specific electrical potential; it would maintain a given height in air, an intermediate being between gas and fluid.

Hearing of the plan for this new expedition, a Syrian called Bou Jeloud flew with people of his tribe to the region of the northern townzones. He came from the steppe south of Damascus. He was a product of the deserts Al-Harra Al-Laja Dirat-at-Tulul. Across the flattened mounds, black boulders of the dried-up baking landscape he swept every summer like a bird with the Anaze, his tribe, remnants of which had come together again. In winters they rode over the steppe to Arabia, put villages to the torch. Only once had he come to a body of water: the Dead Sea. He had ridden only horses and camels. These tawny men, sinewy, with stringy black beards, sailed in delight over the storm-tossed sea north to the gathering grounds in the Shetlands. They pointed out to one another the waves at the bow of their ship, the wash at the sides, the spray at the rudder. It was a desert, another desert. Eyes could never feast enough on the rippling rocking criss-crossing surging. Dunes that the wind lifted and levelled. They understood them well, these waves. Then jellyfish appeared, brownblack multi-armed cephalopods, shoals of fish zigzagged. They had no wish to change a thing. They liked to stand on deck, longed to be down in this water stroked by the wind.

Oh for a horse, a camel that could ride across water. The tawny people, as they spread their white burnoose over the iron rail, frowned and smiled: "Black steppe of Dirat-at-Tulul. Oh the air here is cold. How good it would be to ride in a line across the water." They murmured among themselves. Holyhead, taciturn engineer from London, smiled at Bou Jeloud: "I'll make some ice for you. Then you can ride over the water as far as you like."

"You know my thoughts?"

"I'll blow sand under your feet. I'll spread sand on the frozen water. If you want, you'll walk or ride to Greenland."

"You promise me the moon. Ha! What are you peddling? The whole nonsense! Sure, you can do anything at all. But I don't care what you can do. Not much."

Holyhead smiled a sincere friendly smile as the lean tawny people went away. But something lurked in him. He wanted to do Bou Jeloud a favour. They were so lovable and childlike. He wanted to entrust to them what he could. They would smile on him again. Holyhead, dumpy black-bearded melancholy stooping man, was already numb, like many on the ships assembling here. He was not deceived by the silence of the senates about the expedition's fate. The terrible events on Iceland, the mysterious people-devouring disaster shook him, weakened him, made him tired. What was life for. He went to his construction ship. If Bou Jeloud would only smile again.

One morning he met the Bedouin in their usual stance, lounging curious friendly affectionate at the ship's rail. Water swept by below, wind gusted around them. Ice-floes driving down from the north. Bou Jeloud thrust his hands under his belt. "Not stay on the ship. We wait a week, maybe two, until our fleet is together. I can wait that long. And then the voyage."

El Irak, older stockier: "We shall be patient."

"Why, El Irak? No one forces us to be patient."

"What do you mean?"

"This is not my affair. El Irak, I am a prisoner. I stand at bars and look down. I don't like the ship."

"Well, Jeloud."

"I shall not stay much longer."

They whispered darkly together. Suddenly, laughing El Irak was gone. And as Holyhead approached, young Jeloud, the lanky man in a burnoose, was staring at the water, calling out, waving his arms: "Look! There! Irak there! El Irak! El Irak!"

The rail crowded with cooing chattering people. Empty boat below. Stocky Irak on an ice-floe, scooping water, spraying it high around him. He trod the edge of the floe, laughing. Cheerful cries of advice from above, stamping feet. The floe drifted, drifting around a cliff. It sped sideways away. They stretched their necks. Irak on the floe came in view again: he had tumbled in, was climbing out. His burnoose had come loose, he waved it anxiously at the ship. The Bedouin cried out. A flier took off from the afterdeck. Irak's floe drifted close to another over open water, this one sloping, mountainous, crowded with gulls. Irak's flooding sheet of ice cracked against the sluggish white iceberg, drove splintering up its side; gulls flapped screaming in the air. El Irak vanished under glassy rubble. Fliers and boats in the water. Stately floes and chunks of ice drifted on the sea. The gulls landed, hopped on the edges of the iceberg.

For the next few days Holyhead avoided the Syrians, who held hours-long prayer sessions on a roped-off corner of the deck. A woman with full brown arms stood beside angry Jeloud.

"You do not have good feeling with us, Jedaida. You would rather be in Al-Harra."

"Oh Jeloud, I would rather be in Al-Harra."

"I too, Jedaida. We are a bunch of donkeys. The townzones want to make a new continent. What has this to do with me."

Jedaida pouted her full lips: "The wind is nice. The water could be nice as well. It's not too cold."

Jeloud clenched his fists: “I shall leave the ship. We all want to leave the ships. I do not let them mock and tempt me like they did El Irak. I shall go home. Jump in the water. I hate the ship. Maybe they will tempt us to jump. I won’t stand around like a tethered horse. Enough, Jedaida.”

Her eyes were sad. The sea crashed rolled heavily, licked over reefs.

“I’ll make him smile again,” thought black-bearded Holyhead. Jedaida from Damascus in her yellow robe, her fine golden face looked at him suspiciously; she drew the veil across her mouth. “Oh she’s lovely, this Jedaida. They’re in mourning. If only they don’t leave. So much nicer to do them a favour, than to think of Greenland.”

The technologist touched Bou Jeloud’s arm; he turned to face him. “I haven’t seen you since El Irak’s accident, Jeloud. Are you avoiding me?”

“You? Who are you?”

“You said you’d feel no pleasure if I were to blow sand over your feet, on the frozen water. You said you didn’t care.”

Bou Jeloud laid an arm on Jedaida’s shoulder: “See this man, Jedaida. He wants to melt Greenland’s ice. With me he makes jokes.”

The woman, looking at the deck: “Come. Let us go below.”

The white man looked down too. “I was unable to save El Irak, Jeloud. But I would like to ask if you can be patient. Will you be patient, Jeloud, and you, Jedaida?”

The Syrian, bored, shut his eyes: “What does the clever man from London want?”

Holyhead lifted his gaze, he savoured tawny Jeloud’s grief: “Come over to my construction ship, Bou Jeloud. I want to show you something.”

Jedaida tugged at Jeloud’s arm: “Don’t go.”

“I won’t come, Holyhead. You’ll tempt me to jump in the water, like Irak.”

“I mean you well, you and your wife Jedaida. I’m not too bothered about Greenland. Who now cares about the affairs of the townzones. Come, you too, Jedaida, if you want. We’ll do something that will quieten your longing for the desert of Al-Harra. The sea too is beautiful. You’ll be happier.”

“I tell you, Holyhead, cunning white engineer. You think I am a brown simpleton to be dazzled by ten words. I shall come to your ship. I am not afraid of you. I am not afraid of him, Jedaida. He thinks I am like this one or that one. I come with you, Holyhead.” Jedaida stepped back. Her head was still bowed, arms crossed at her breast. Whispered: “Promise me, Holyhead, that nothing will happen to him.”

The black-bearded engineer: “You come too, Jedaida.”

“Promise me nothing will happen to him.”

And Bou Jeloud went with the delighted inwardly trembling white man. His tribe saw nothing of him for days on end. One evening he went down on his knees before Jedaida, buried his head in her lap, pressed his lips to her breast, rubbed his face against her cold cheeks, groaned. He was in good form. “Sweet homeland. Lovely desert. Lovely crags. Lovely sand. We are coming to the waves, dear Jedaida, to waves to waves, just think, it’s happening.”

She looked down at him. What has that man done to him. But Bou Jeloud pulled her into his cabin, embraced her until she melted. He slept for hours with her in the cabin, closer than they had been since coming aboard.

She left him lying there asleep, hissed at Holyhead: “What is up with Jeloud?”

“You tell me, Jedaida.”

“He groans. He is crazy. He lies in his cabin.”

“He was happy. He made no complaint to me.”

“You promised me nothing would happen to him. I – I do not like him so.” She returned to the cabin where he was still sleeping, lay gingerly at his side. After listening to his breathing she pressed against him. “Jedaida,” he muttered, dreaming into the dark, “I shall ride on water. Water shall feel our hoofbeats. We can do it. Water. Ride to Greenland.” She turned away.

Now Bou Jeloud kept to the engineer’s ship. The woman slipped across once to observe him. Outside a door was a thin wreath of smoke. The smoke was evanescent as a spider’s web, but it pushed Jedaida’s veil up over her head. She touched it. It was like rubber, resisted, let itself be stretched, sprang back. The black-bearded white man Holyhead came to the door in his lab coat, drew back his lips when he saw the woman. His eyes on the woman, he gathered the smoke in his arms as if it were a delicate little animal body, held and stroked it like a kitten. Some strands came loose at this sudden grasping, he gathered them in, held them to his chest.

“Come, Jedaida. Jeloud is here. We’re glad to see you. We keep no secrets from you.”

She stood uncertainly at the door that he held open for her, gazed around at the air, at Holyhead’s arms. “What was that? The smoke. What was that?”

“Come, Jedaida. Please come in. Don’t stand in the doorway.”

“What is this smoke? What will you do with it? You hold it in your arms.”

The white man smiled. “Yes, look. This is smoke, and no smoke. We made it, Jeloud and I. Pretty, isn’t it? But do come in, join us.”

The brown narrow-shouldered woman stood there, could not lift her eyes from the smoke, her head high. Tonelessly she said: “Thank you. I shall go. I came just for a moment.” And as Jeloud’s voice sang out in the swirling room she quickly turned and ran back up the steps, at her side a smoke-wad from which she shrank back with a cry. Two sailors chased the wad. They caught it. Suddenly it hung motionless over a step. The laughing men tried to push it higher.

Lunged, pushed at it with their shoulders. Jedaida, frozen by an irresistible urge, seized with fear, close to breakdown, watched from above, both hands at her veiled throat, watched them strike playfully at the wad with a crowbar, push the iron bar from below into the soft mass until it clanged against the step. The crowbar swung like a pendulum with the rocking of the ship, unsupported. The men convulsed in laughter, bent their knees, beckoned her down. She ran across the deck.

Jeloud, proud young Bedouin, her husband, did not ask after her, saw little of her. He stood among the other Bedouin glowing, boastful. Wildly elated, eyes wandering like a drunkard's, he sometimes chased after his wife, now fully-veiled, tried to catch her. She fought him off, begged hesitantly, softly: that he not neglect his work, that he not allow himself to sink to unworthy amusements. Jeloud clapped his hands: "Did you hear that? My work, she said. Yes, it is my work, and Holyhead's. You are sweet, my lady Jedaida. Soon all, all of you will see what we have made."

"Who are this 'we'?"

"Holyhead, my friend Holyhead and me. Oh he can do so many things. We shall create something wonder-wonderful."

She whispered: "Yes, I am proud of you." Gritted teeth.

"We shall ride over the sea, Jedaida. It will happen. What do you say. Already my horse in the hold has double, triple rations. It will rejoice with me in this great hour. There, look at the water."

"I have seen it, Jeloud."

"Take off your veil. You can see nothing through the veil."

"I can see through the veil."

"Not clearly enough. Come, give. Give. Look, there it is, now you see it. Now you'll see. Look, Jedaida my sweet wife, my honey, my balm, those are waves. Grey and green and white. More beautiful even than our sands in Al-Harra. One day I shall go down onto them with my horse. Just think, it will happen. I shall go down like El Irak, but I won't fall in. Not I. By Allah, not I. I shall leap onto my bay, sit in my saddle like before, Jedaida, when I fetched you. But why are you crying?"

"Am I crying? Give me back my veil."

"You think I shall fall in, Jedaida? Just like El Irak! Hoho! Have no fear, my sweet. I shall not fall in. You are so lovely. Don't cry. We test everything well, Holyhead and I."

"Give me my veil!" she cried, "give me my veil. You are my husband. You cannot deny me my veil."

"Here. Here it is. It's yours. I wanted to show you the sea. But I've made you cross? How? Now I can't see your face. Now I must imagine how lovely you are."

She let him take her hand. Her shoulders were heaving. But as she left he raised his arms in triumph: "She is sad! She's afraid for me! Yet I will succeed at this."

A new personnel transport fleet had set off for Greenland. Holyhead's laboratory ships stayed behind. It was known at the gathering ground that Holyhead, the Englishman, had had a remarkable unprecedented stroke of luck: a Syrian had become his assistant. One afternoon, launches from every vessel arranged themselves around Holyhead's construction ship. Portholes were opened amidships; close to the waterline big flue-like tubes projected. From their funnel-shaped mouths white smoke poured in wide full puffs; they sank as they left the funnel, panned out, spread across the water, covered the surface. The smoke lay level and dense over the water, on the water. It rose with the waves. At its edges the rocking cotton-wool mist bulged and fluttered, became ragged; the vapour nudged nearby boats aside. They hit at it with oars; these at once rebounded from the encroaching emanation as if from solid rubber or cork. A wooden walkway was laid aslant over the water. A horse was led down, stood neighing in fear, leapt circling on the unyielding dented misty layer. A tawny man in a burnoose with coloured ribbons at his waist strutted waving down the walkway. Stroked the nervous shying beast, held it fast, mounted, rode a circuit around the layer of mist. Whistles, hooting sirens from the jubilant ships.

That evening Holyhead solemnly joyfully took the Syrian's hand. Jeloud embraced him. It was almost too much for the white man. They celebrated all night. Next morning Jeloud wanted to carry out his plan: with an escort of ships ride across the sea; if possible up to Arctic waters.

That same morning Jedaida, who had been in seclusion, left her cabin. Sought out Holyhead, still sleeping off the night before. She waited patiently on deck. Around noon she saw him; walked beside him: "How much longer do you think to live, Holyhead? Black-beard devil, what are you planning? You are not afraid of me."

"Jedaida, I can't see through your veil if you are serious."

"I joke with you the same way you joke with me."

"Jedaida."

"That name is not for you to say. Not for you."

Holyhead gazed speechless at the trembling woman. Softly, hand on his heart: "Come to my cabin. Don't stand here."

She slipped along behind him, closed the door, threw the veil back over her shoulder, stood breathing deeply against the wall. He sat down on a stool: "What have I done? Have I made you cross? By giving Jeloud this pleasure?"

"You are a devil. I do not need to answer you. They should chase you back to your zone. But now you have ensnared yourself. Now it is over."

Holyhead looked at her, looked at his hands, sighed: "Oh, I am so sad."

"Say nothing. Your soft cursed voice. Hypocrite. Cunning villain. Seducer, despoiler, like all Whites."

“Wife of Jeloud, if only I could ask your forgiveness.”

“Mockery, all mockery, Holyhead. I can take it. Regret, you will regret, by Allah.” She stepped quickly across the cabin, veil flying behind her. Her hands felt over the table, in the wall cabinet: “What do you have here? You must have a weapon. To poison or drug or seduce or kill me. Show. Where is it?” She ran to him, pulled him to his feet: “It’s around your neck. Take it off. Take away the leather. There.” She grabbed the gun – it was like a revolver, turned it over. His eyes were closed. She waited. He kept them closed. She shook herself in disgust: “What were you going to do to me?”

The gun fell at his feet. Holyhead bent down for the gun: “I shall kill myself.”

She clenched her fists: “Do it. You deserve it.” He stood, breathed, metal in his hands: “I deserve it. Who knows anything of this? In life surrounded by death. I don’t know if I deserve death. But I have made some sort of contact with you.”

She paced up and down: “What does he have here? What? Machines to lead astray, cast spells. Show them to me. Open up the cabinets, I will see it all. So. Jeloud saw these. Must I now jump in the water? You made all of this. Let me look at you.”

She stared at him, tried to penetrate the bleak expression. “Allah! A white man with a long beard. I must go to Jeloud.” She groaned, slumped wearily against a cabinet, whimpered: “I am lost. What must I do?” Suddenly she pulled herself together, her face blank; she smiled an empty smile: “What am I doing. All is well. All well.” Her head was hot under a sense of desolation, a rising darkness, a fear – what fear. Holyhead stood by the door. “I shall tell you, Holyhead, what will happen now. You have led him astray. Why did you do it? Why did you take him from our ship?”

“I wanted him to smile.”

“And I? I was his wife.”

“I have taken nothing of yours. Am I a woman?”

“Good,” she cried, “well said! Did you see him? Did you not see Jeloud? Proud Bedouin, an Anaze, ha! Glowing, dancing; riding on clouds! Did you see, are you too under a spell? That was my husband. I am no longer a wife. You said well. I hate him, hate him. Tomorrow he will ride his horse down there. He feeds it himself. What if it drops dead. If the wooden walkway breaks. If your mist is useless, and he is swallowed up along with horse and is gone.”

She held the veil over her face. Holyhead leaned against the table, breathing heavily: “I shall quit. Oh I can’t take any more. I shall quit, Jedaida.”

She sobbed, tore her hair: “I cannot live.”

“Oh. I am leaving now.”

She held his hands, pulled herself up to him, whimpering groaning: “”Wait a moment, gentle tiger. I shall look at you, gentle tiger. Don’t run from me. You have made me poor. You kept me back from you, from him. Regret what you have done.”

“I have no regrets. It was a joy for me. A sweet joy.”

“You see. You can say this to me. Will you do what I want?”

“Yes, Jedaida.”

“Will you kill Jeloud?”

“You’re crazy.”

“Kill Jeloud.”

“No.”

“Do it,” she hissed. “Yes, do it. For me, Holyhead, end his life. I beg you. You can do anything. You made the cloud. End his life, do away with him. For me.”

“I shall not.”

First her sobbing became unrestrained: “For me, for me.” Then she grabbed his beard. Face rigid with hate, empty blind eyes. She squeezed his hands: “You must. You must – be with me. There is no other way. So you must be with me. Then I shall not leave your side. Then you come with me. What do you say?”

“You want me to be with you.”

“Yes, come with me. We leave today. Or tomorrow. To my country. You shall not see Jeloud again.”

That evening Holyhead took leave of his engineers technologists physicists. The Shetland Isles disagree with him, he’s going away to recuperate, that’s all. He looked crushed, as if poisoned; maybe he had been exposed too long to the novel substances. When Bou Jeloud the Syrian undertook the first ride over the sea next morning with an escort of boats and ships – pictures of the proud stunning event were despatched to every townzone on the continents – Jedaida and Holyhead were already flying over the German Plain, headed southeast. Population centres and giant cities became rarer. Blue warm sea came, little islands. The coast of a new land appeared, sere mountains, wide empty sands. At Damascus they mounted horses. For the whole journey the white man had not seen Jedaida’s face. When a swarming group of Bedouin stopped them on the stony plateau, Jedaida gave her name, the white man was taken away into the company of males. Anaze of Jedaida’s clan were camped by Ed Daba.

The woman made a report, declared to the sheikh: “You wanted to see Bou Jeloud, my husband. He is not with me. He busies himself with clouds that he wants to ride on. He has no connection with us anymore. Is no longer Anaze.”

“Where is he now?”

“I hope he is dead. He wanted to ride to Iceland, where the townzones are tearing the Earth apart. I hope he is drowned with his horse, or burnt to a cinder.”

“You hate him very much.” The judge glanced at Holyhead: “Touch your forehead to the sand before you speak. Who is this man?”

“He led Jeloud astray. A creature –,” she broke out in grieving tears, “I wish the sea had swallowed him before we met. We only meant to travel, Jeloud was curious, I couldn’t hold him back. This man put Jeloud under his spell and made use of all the evil in Jeloud. Until he was no longer my husband but a servant, servant to this monkey, this monkey, a mirror to his hateful goat-beard face. You dog, bark, tell them why I brought you here. Spit it out, if you can manage it. There stands the judge.”

Holyhead, hands tied behind his back, flanked by men with spears, regarded the woman from empty brown eyes. Said nothing. She threw herself down: “Give him to me. I want revenge. Is it not a shame to me, to lose Jeloud to such a one. For this he deserted me. Give him to me.”

The judge whispered at length with the other men. “Jedaida, we are sorry you have returned without Bou Jeloud and cannot report to us on the ridiculous actions of the townzones. And how the great Greenland expedition they make such a fuss about is progressing. Your brothers say the death of this man would console you. We do not intend to question him. There is no profit in hearing the words of an infidel. Take him. Do what you want with him.”

Jedaida’s brothers assigned two mounted men, each with a drum at the saddle. Trussed Holyhead was lifted onto a nag. They rode with him into the deserts and high plateaux, southeast towards Beni-Sughra, drumming through camps and settlements.

Jedaida rode in widow’s weeds. The tied-up white man groaned. He was gagged, almost never opened his eyes. Never asked for food or water. He sat slumped forward and to the side. The horse jolted, almost threw him; they had to tie his legs under. At nightfall they forced water and mushy dates into him. He never slept. Knelt half the night, cursed himself, his fate, the cities where he had lived, his parents, his body and his soul. His black beard grew long, his cheeks hollowed. He lacerated himself, tears streaming down his face. At daybreak Jedaida shook him awake, looked hard at him. He did not see how she sometimes ran from him, hid away, bit her fingers and did not cry. When he let himself to be shaken like a lump of wood and stood there tottering, she hissed: “I don’t want you like this. What’s wrong with you? Are you a man? Ha, you. We ride on. Look at me.” But he would not look at her. They bundled him onto the nag. The woman rode beside the ragged dangling white man. Children at camps threw sand and sticks at him. Bedouin women knew how to hate, they boxed his ears, urged him to hang himself, spattered him with horse dung. Jedaida beside him like his shadow. Watching every move. Mistrusting, eyes hooded, menace in her silence.

The men at Beni Sughra, seeing the dangling speechless human baggage, wanted to put an end to it: lure the insatiably vengeful woman away on a pretext, and kill him. Jedaida noticed the whispers and lurking groups. That night she squatted with a dog by the tent where the white man lay. The men dared not push past, felt bitter. By means of false directions they kept her close for some days. From one of the drummers she learned they had agreed to shoot the white man at Tal Reinah. “Shoot. From a distance. That I believe. Bandits!” When it was dark she awoke the drummers, they were to ready the horses. She felt her way in the dark to Holyhead’s tent, shook him.

“Holyhead, it’s me, Jedaida. Get up. We must be away.”

“What’s happening?”

“Up. We must leave. They want to take your life. Oh Allah. Listen. Get up. This is a nest of robbers.”

“They, they want to kill me?”

“Any minute! Quick, Holyhead, no time to lose. Who knows what they’ll do to you.”

“They want to kill me? Then this is the place! Hour of my blessing. My blessed night.” He knelt in the sand. She grabbed his hand, pulled at his shoulder, covered his mouth.

“I don’t want this. Oh Allah. Stand up. Don’t shout, Holyhead, don’t. You will not shout. They’re listening. You have a fever, you don’t know what’s happening, what you are saying. You wouldn’t eat, now you are so weak. They’ll shoot you, they are Anaze, but robbers, they’ll shoot from a distance. I don’t know why or when. Maybe because you are a white man. They are wicked. Stand up.”

“I don’t want to! Don’t want to. Shan’t.”

“Allah, Allah, what should I do?” In the dark she lay on the ground, strewed sand over herself. His bound hands felt for her, his hair hung matted over his face. He stammered, his voice cracked, he was almost babbling. “The game’s up. Should I laugh now? You can leave me. It’s the end. They’ll shoot me. And you – you want to keep it going. You’re a sweet girl, Jedaida, sweet. But now you must let me go. They’ll shoot me. You can’t stop them. Here, touch me. I’m still Holyhead from London, engineer physicist who made oil-clouds. Soon he’ll lie in the dust, a nothing, like his glorious townzones. But I’m glad. I can give the order. One two three – and I’m shot.” He felt for the tent wall, climbed to his feet. “And you – have you had your fill, my Jedaida?”

She let him pull her up, murmured shivered: “Terrible what Allah has hung over me. I cannot leave you. Cannot. Cannot. You must live. I must keep you with me. Terrible what Allah plans for me.”

He swayed, groaned: “What is it? My God, I said it’s over. And you won’t leave me.” He opened his mouth wide, growled in a horribly cracked voice: “I – don’t – want to.” Now rage surged through the woman. She jumped to her feet, pummelled the man’s tottering body, wrestled pushed pulled him round, threshed whimpering: “No shouting. You come with me. I cannot leave you here. If I have to throttle you.” She stuffed his mouth with her veil as she squeezed him; she wept stroked kissed: “Allah help me. Forgive me for what I do. Allah help. Come, come with me, say yes. You are my soul. It is you. Don’t hit. I shan’t kill you. Allah help.”

She fetched the drummer, they put the bound man on a horse. They slipped away through the night on muffled hooves.

For two days they wandered in the stony plain. Until El Habis lay behind them, the buildings of Damascus came into view.

So fearful was the woman that the Anaze would rob her of the man that for a long time she kept moving in the great city-state, from one quarter to another, until the drummer led her to a friend of her brother's.

He was half dead, the man she brought from Beni Sughra to Damascus. He lay delirious in the room she made ready for him. Around his neck were amulets from her: blue pearl, magic fish magic swords. She was not allowed near, the drummer attended to him. When he could stand, focus his eyes, one morning he turned his ghostly face to her when she appeared in the doorway. "Jedaida! Jedaida, come in. Am I a prisoner?"

Entering, bowing her head, she murmured very pale: "Go where you like."

"Really?" And stomped past her leaning on sticks, down the stairs, said not a word. Grinding her teeth, wailing, whimpering, she lay defeated in the doorway.

When he knocked several days later, she pulled the wide fringe of her dark cloak over her head, greeted him demurely. He sat by the window silent, stony. She tender, imploring, tried to pull him back to life. A rapture that was almost terror glimmered in him. When she looked at the black-bearded sunburnt man a shiver ran through her: images of the Anaze camp, him tied to a nag, lying among animals; how he'd cried out, wanted to die in the night at her hand. She could not rid herself of the sweet tormenting thought. And Bou Jeloud himself, proud handsome Anaze whom this man had loved. Had he not come across the sea, was it not him? Her heart brimmed. Jeloud, young, childlike, across the water. Riding to her, he's coming: she's at his side, they are united. Jeloud and she riding as one, embraced welded together, to Damascus, where something dark, a violent rapture awaits her, a monstrous joy to devour her.

"Love me, Holyhead, as you loved Jeloud. I shall be to you what he was to you. Love me as you loved him. Just the same. Hold me!" And as he held her she groaned in bliss: "Good, good. This we suffer from you. How well you love. How sweetly you punish us."

The man from the mighty western townzones trembled, looked deep into her face, explored her slender form: "Two arms, two breasts, two thighs. Whose arms, whose breasts? A human's. Two arms, a throat, nothing else. And this for a human is enough."

Now she went about the streets his slave. He gave her a pointed gilded bonnet, over which she laid a white shawl. She wore a bright jacket over a white muslin shirt. Brass cylinder between soft dark eyes. She looked at her dainty sandals, knelt beside a neighbour, smiling showed her gleaming teeth, took a deep breath: "Ah Badudah, I shall stay, no more wandering. Give me another horse-hair, so nothing will happen to me. Ah Badudah, there is nothing so sweet as to serve a man."

MASSIF OF GNEISS AND GRANITE

GREENLAND, massif of gneiss and granite thrust like a wedge from the Pole into the waters of the Atlantic. Its surface covered eight hundred thousand square miles. The primordial mountains of its body had been worn away by wind, streaming water, frost, shuddering glaciers, their mighty folds ground down, planed flat. The elements still tore at the sturdy torso. The land shouldered an icecap thousands of feet deep. A line of high mountains loomed along its eastern edge, drift-ice barricaded the coast; torrents poured down valley floors over cliffs. In the west was a mountainous region with sharp peaks and ridges. Huge glaciers crept through the mountains to the coast. They descended through winding valleys, climbed broken with crevasses over rocky sills. Their surface swelled like waves. They flowed from corries of compacted snow slow as snails down to the sea, invaded fjords, blocked bays.

Seven miles wide, forty long, the Frederikshaab glacier plunged into the ocean; it swept a broad swathe of rubble before it.

Store Karajak. It advanced forty feet in a day. At the 70th parallel the Jakobshavn glacier, Upernavik at the 73rd, Ulaksoak at the 78th.

TorsukatakAssatakTuarparsukTasarminatKangerlussuaq ItliarsuakUlangordlak.

They pushed earthen ramparts ahead, spread all around them debris broken from the mountains and the till at their base as moraines, scraped away cliffs. White rivers flowed from them, carried silt and gravel that would sink to the floor of the fjords.

Water had wedded itself to this swelling of the Earth at the North Pole; unlike the other continents water had not abandoned the land and withdrawn to the seas. It scrabbled hammered tore at primordial rock. Dropped swirling unceasing from dark and daylit air, snow, myriads of shimmering six-branched crystals stars motes, sprinkled pressed softly silently down on giant stolid domes peaks hollows. And as the motes sintered and froze they congealed, cemented

together into greenish glacier ice that laid itself over the older ice sheet. And through its gaps new water flowed, froze again in the depths. The mountain of ice grew. Everywhere ice growing in silence across the vast bare land. Deserts of ice spread across the interior. Black peaks – nunataks – rose out of the great frozen water that kept climbing thriving on old snow up to the high plateaux, pushed glaciers down to the fjords. Towards the north the ice-plain hunched highest. Stretched away in huge undulations from the 60th to beyond the 80th parallel, between twenty and sixty degrees west. Expanses of slush, dry snow-deserts lay on the surface, ice hummocks at higher altitudes. Into them were set water-filled sinks, fringed by heaps of deep wild snow. Lakes glacial brooks emptied into these and roared over rents in the ice down into bottomless clefts, wells whose blue walls fell vertically away.

White-blue the sky over this continent. The glowing gasball of a sun gave warmth and light here for a few months only. The land lay in twilight, through which the silent moon and distant twinkling stars looked down and the shimmering Northern Lights danced as in a fairytale. Winds hurtled over mountains plains glaciers, the foehn bringing warmth, northwesterlies that whipped the snow into clouds and drove it on like a curtain. The sweeping storm dug channels in old snow and glaciers, modelled the ice-masses, created dunes with shallow slopes. Planed the frozen ground smooth.

Animals and plants braved the polar waste. Forests of kelp grew in the depths of the Polar Sea. The baying polar fox, migrant reindeer brown in summer, polar bears scavenging birds' eggs on islands. Lemmings owls shaggy musk-ox seal elk guillemot. Mossy lawns crept over the ground on sheltered slopes. Grey lichen clung to cliffsides. Populations of single-celled algae spread over snow, over little stars and slivers of water; they coloured the ground grey brown pink violet.

From Europe, from the coasts of Belgium and Britain in an endless line along the sea-lanes came black-tarred construction vessels, floating factories, oil-cloud ships rocking over the ocean. Icebreakers flanking them, and ahead. Soundlessly they cut the water. They divided north and south as they passed burning Iceland, encircled Greenland. And just as the ice cast a barrier all around Greenland, so they barricaded the ice with their black deep-hulled structures. New arrivals streamed in. When they reached their positions, greeted in silence by the crews of the Iceland fleets, they blew heavy smoke from their portholes, Holyhead's oil-breath, its white mass infused with coloured swirls, greenish blue red. The ships probed tentatively, first with this colour then with that. The smoke lifted slowly, the wind barely able to shift it sideways, new smoke blowing continually, building up, waiting like a horse outside its stable, maintaining an even height. The coloured smoke-masses climbed, their motion slowing until at a certain height it faltered. They gathered themselves, little by little spread horizontally, like oil on a sheet of water.

At Scoresby Sound on the east coast, at the southernmost point, at Disko Bay in the west tests were carried out to ascertain the height of oil clouds of particular composition. The plan was they should rise above the highest ice-fields, blanket the whole continent as evenly as possible. Once the optimum mix of gases was identified, the ring of ships around Greenland set to work. Heedless of foehn winds and icy storms, they pumped dark smoke clouds that gathered at enormous height and were pushed inland by more clouds coming behind. Clouds drifting out to sea were rounded up by lines of fliers with squall-bombs. The corralled gas-balls stuck tenaciously together. Ever darker masses settled in a plane, as they piled up ever denser became ever more fixed. They were an unyielding space-filling thing intermediate between gas and solid. Falling rain could not penetrate the burgeoning banks of cloud. Water and snow gathered in hollows, spouted onto the fringing lines of ships, but had no effect on the elevation of the gas. Attrition from the edges remained the greatest danger. Squadrons of fliers and cargo airships were stationed at horrendous height, always in danger of becoming trapped by the rolling clouds, capsizing crashing. They had to set a constant barrage of explosions all around the gas zone to prevent the smoke from blurring fragmenting. The engineers' fear that the buoyancy of the clouds would gradually diminish with height, that the cloud-masses would begin to sink, proved unfounded. The enormous dark cloud-bank over Greenland maintained its elevation; would support rafts as buoyantly as the sea.

The Iceland expeditionaries went about their aerial work in their usual grim dogged silence. They averted their gaze from the horror of the luminous Tourmaline vessels; not a word was said about them. The ships were stuck fast. The newcomers did not see these monsters as ships, so overrun were they with bright algal tree-like growths, occupied by swarms of birds. At their destinations the Tourmaline vessels had been clumped close together away from the rest of the fleet, as if infectious. The immobile structures had long become overgrown; the growths had thrown bridges between them which were only rarely severed by shifting ice floes. Birds strutted and nested on the grey red bridges; molluscs and fish became caught up, sported and died. The resting vessels loomed like grassy hills into the icy air. As they lay there in the bays, at the entrances to fjords, they looked like steep hunchbacked islands. Sometimes the grey and red hulks were seen to twitch and shudder.

The Iceland expeditionaries laid great wide duckboards on top of the oil-clouds. And when they stepped on them they pulled in nearby boards, aligning and pinning them together. Sometimes a raft on which they stepped would wobble, slide sideways into a depression in the cloud, rear up, overturn. The castaways scrabbled in the grey pink violet smoke. They tried to work free of the gelatinous spongy boggy stuff, threshed about, paddled hand over hand towards the boards, could not extricate themselves. New masses of gas drifted in, bumped about and over them. They were bedded in, cemented, they flailed at chest nose mouth from which blood flowed, were squashed as the head flopped wheezing sideways. At the start many up there in the air stumbled, lay sprawling arms dangling on the billowing gas. The murky upwelling nudged at the bodies, stuck fast to a limb, tore it from the body, stretched the body with its scrabbling hands treading feet ever longer longer as it was drawn down. At the edges the fabric frayed; sometimes a

suffocated black-faced flier or a twisted torn-off body part fell onto ice or into water. Up there they ran about, laid board after board.

The battle with the winds began. The nor'easter with fog and thickly swirling snow tore at the outer fringes of the cloudbanks, blew ragged fragments away. Small groups and solitary figures were swept to the land far below, perished. People stood on the flattened cloud, stumbled; it was worse than at sea. Were tossed with their board rafts high up, then down, from side to side. They had to make terrible haste to lay board after board on the vaporous foundation growing out into the land. Often they stood insensible up there, flung themselves in, vomited, were tumbled whirled around, carried by the surging wallowing boards that sometimes sped apart as in a game, were piled atop one another by a knot of cloud, crashed together. At the edges they hung over the immense land of ice. The watery mirror of the fjords lay far below, in the east rocky peaks soared with the rigidity of death almost to their feet, jagged crests almost touching them. The icy breath of old snow wafted up. Blue-white glaciers moved sluggishly down across the white plain, through the rocky defiles they had abraded. Scree and avalanche debris hung askew over rock terraces like giant carcasses. Just as on Iceland once they had thrown up bridgeworks from the coast to Myvatn Krafla Leir-hnjúkur, to Eyjafs Bay, up from unlucky Heroðsfloi, had swayed in ash-swirling air as bridges collapsed above the Jökulsa River, on the Fiski plain, over the eastern glaciers, just as they had crested mighty Vatna before its sky-splitting fiery eruption incinerated them and blew them away, so now did they clamber across this silent land. Winds howled over the ice. The land lay dormant, like a blind man awaiting the workings of fate. From every coast the layers of smoke reached out in mutual yearning The people aimed to steer the billowing masses together, leave just one gap like an island in the middle.

At Disko Bay, above Umanak Fjord, bluish oval clouds appeared under the dark banks of oil-gas, driven by a foehn wind. They were spotted by pilots of the cargo airships. The air grew calm and warm. The gassy masses sank, slowly at first, then at a rush. Like canoes in a wild torrent – the boatmen stand with their long pole, push away from dangerous shoals, shove off from below, spring this way that way – the workers on the skywards-rearing heaving boards steered clear with poles, pulled nearby boards to them. The gassy masses undulated, people tumbled rolled. The layers not yet thick and dense enough, they were blistering. People struck out with their poles, plunged this way and that. The motion came from far below. Dense round pellets of snow were set flying by the advancing foehn. Something was working with ever-growing strength at the surface of the ice, scrubbing the surface swab after swab, jab after jab. Snow flew in irregular lumps large and small, surf covered the snow-plain. It rose from the ground like steam and blew away. While high above they pinned boards together. While smoke blew sluggishly from the construction vessels along the coast, slow, helpless, blew across, was pushed aside by drumming air, turned spiralling about itself and broke apart. Along the edges of the oil-cloud, balls of vapour swirling sky-high escaped abruptly, shot up on the warm current like little cotton-wool clouds, shredded beyond repair. The foehn chased the tenuous dissipating layers of gas out to sea. Loosely-laid boardwalks were lifted, whirled about like paper in a gale. The storm drove people poles boards before it, carried them like a lion in its mouth for miles on the dispersing gas before dropping them onto raging black water, onto jostling ice-floes. Fliers pursuing them were tossed about, shot up like rockets, were hurled aside by the wind. Amid this fury the ships still emitted the wretched smoke, only to see it shredded by the storm as the ships were jolted lifted snatched shoved, crept quaking around each other, tried to hide, protect themselves, while up above a leaden sky appeared, amid its emptiness red and blue-black clouds, coloured rags gleaming fading. Cloudbank over Disko Bay blown away north and south; banks deep inland torn apart. People reeling, sliding down, legs arms threshing, eyes squinting, mouths tonguing biting spitting, overwhelmed by the gas. They peeled it off like skin. In the air, the howling foehn, they tussled with the gas, were swaddled in it, bundled round as a hedgehog. They plunged down onto ice, flattened slowly out as the ice freed them.

From the Faroes and Shetland more oil-cloud ships came chugging, formed a second cordon around the Greenland massif. The shimmering cloud already lay thick on the land, undulating slightly, a mass of dough. Gales shrieked as if against a wall of stone. Above the bank, as it had for eons, the sun moved for just a few hours. Its light no longer penetrated. The continent was cut off from the ancient white sky, silent moon, shimmering Northern Lights, twinkling swarms of little stars. Water vapour from the land gathered at the underside of the cloud-bank, spread out very slowly, resolved itself in snow flurries, muddy rain. It could not escape; a heavy damp haze blanketed the land, the temperature rose.

It grew darker. Unease gripped animal life. Reindeer herds crossed the ice, left their grazing grounds, went wandering. The herds could not sense direction, more packs joined them, they stood nervously on coastal islands. Bears and foxes were driven from their lairs. They were fearful, ran about sniffing the air, found nothing changed, were not calmed. Anxious cries of ravens. Sleek seals emerged, lumbered over the ice, sought new water. Animals became more wary; where enmity existed, attacks were fiercer. Ever more cloud-strata drifted over the mountains and ice-deserts from east south west, met by ragged streamers from the other side. Now and then an isolated unlucky board-layer floated over land on a detached hunk of cloud, reached the oncoming bank safely. But when with their own eyes they saw others on the bank, there was no calling out, no waving. Some slumped exhausted.

The gas-ships reinforced the clouds. Towards the end of August they withdrew. The abandoned Tourmaline vessels had to be secured. There were no problems detailing gangs from all the fleets to attend to them; tensely, as if spellbound, the Greenland expeditionaries did everything necessary with no need for orders.

But overwhelming horror as the little boats brought them closer to the bright buzzing islands. The outlines of a ship could no longer be discerned. Whales obstructed the approach to the vessels. Explosives had to be thrown; the water

turned horribly red; dark bodies floated for a while on the surface. The islands were entangled in a mass of hanging seaweed like the net of a birdcatcher. They had to cut hack burn a way through. Boats carried the severed stems and netting out to the open sea. Step by step they tore loose the rampant vegetation; layer upon layer had to be dragged clear. The boats changed hourly; always some people failed to overcome their rapture and had to be escorted forcibly back. At last, after demolishing the seaweed bridges and clearing the surrounding water, they reached the vessel's hull. How strangely everything was changed. The deck was laid bare, you could see, now that the bridges and heaviest masses of seaweed had been cleared away, how the freighters twitched, moved slowly from the spot, made jerking backward upward movements.

Soon the ships moved more easily, boats trailing them; there was a fear they would lift themselves onto, out of the water. All the brass of the railings was gone, all planking burst open. Tendrils branches slender trunks sprouted through the hull from inside and outside. The few cabins on the main deck seemed full of steam; but this was merely appearance: actually they were filled with a kind of spider's web. At the anchor points of the grey-white webs along its edges, the proliferating panelling of the walls, doorframes window-frames had played their part with a maze of filaments. But no spiders could be seen in the cabins. And when they tore at the webs with hands and sticks they realised it was the finest hairlike grasslike emanation of swollen leaves, hollow ducts and skeins of wood from lockers ceilings floors. Well away from the wood the plants had constructed wall-like organs. Every cabin was as flimsy as pith scraped from a stalk; in time it must collapse, lignify.

They stepped on shaky ground. When they opened the deck for access to the holds, choking gases welled up. The decks were as soft and porous as sponge. Knots in the masts had produced rampant new branches with strange hairy satiny leaves; these were often packed tightly together like petals. Beetles and ants pullulated. No need to search for the holds. From the depths of the ships came an intense unevenly throbbing growing light, an often blinding glare that made artificial light superfluous in the general gloom. They smashed through the decks to the holds with axes saws fire; ripped open the thoroughly mouldy matted bulkheads. Lumps of wood and brass were thrown in the sea, fish pursued the flotsam, swam close with open mouths, chewed at it, carried it on their backs. Now mountains of webbing lay exposed to the air. Magical sight, stretching away through all the ship's bays. The walls of the holds had been clad in smooth rolled steel. The steel was magically changed. It was no longer smooth; had buckled, thrust out blisters boils globules. From the surface of the undulating bulging protrusions emerged long radiant glittering needles of crystal that drew metal about them, leaving nearby surfaces chapped and pitted. The steel grew from the walls in towards the luminous webs. Terrible glare from the webs, their pulsing darkening flashing. Stink of mould, upwelling heat. The fliers stretched out hooks to the webs that hung as placidly as when they were packed away. Web after web was drawn up through dark rain-dripping air. Already on the oil-clouds the plates had been laid which would bring them to incandescence.

At hundreds of points, cables were hauled up from the vessels onto the cloud layer; these would connect the main power cable to the webs. Everyone worked feverishly, close to exhaustion. By the beginning of September the Tourmaline holds were empty. The freighters were already covered in mould again; several collapsed.

Now the oil-cloud ships and personnel transports pulled away from the gloomy icebound ice-extruding coasts, ploughed southwest, southeast. Scattered well away from this Greenland over which they had cast dark night, lying astern with its whimpering fearful fauna under the bank of oil-clouds and the glimmering webs. Squadrons of fliers and airships tore wildly ahead of the oceangoing vessels. The ocean must be crossed as swiftly as possible. They sailed for two days; the western fleets skirted Baffin-land, the eastern crossed the 10th degree west.

On the night of the third day, current from the power cable was unleashed on the insulation of the webs. At that moment every vessel slowed, fliers came down to the decks and foaming water. Shudders and trembling went through the people pacing the dark decks in groups, running from their cabins.

The end had come. Krafla Leir-hnjúkur Herðubreið Katla Hekla had been blown up. Iceland torn apart, Earth's furnaces opened. On the mobile bridgeworks, hundreds of people just like those standing on the decks had been turned to ashes blown across glaciers drowned. More ships and throngs of people had trooped here from the Continent. They never rested. The island yielded up its heat. The webs were charged. Terrible Tourmaline glowed and sang. Drew to it fish birds algae in the sea, tried to fly. At last Greenland had appeared, across the water. They had to spread clouds over the land, build boardwalks. How many had perished, had plunged to Earth.

Now as sirens blared they stood on deck above the rolling sea. Tremors drumbeats slithered around behind their throats, so that they groaned and their legs grew weak. Their eyes opened wide in fear, bulged white barbaric. Corners of mouths were turned tensely down, lips pursed. They ducked. Hot flushes ran over their bodies, drenched backs and necks. "Disaster. What a disaster. Oh dear Heavens, such a disaster. What have we done. Sweet night, sweet life. Lovely spars, lovely railings, mercy. Lovely people planks sails brasses. Lovely jacket, rough wool, mercy. My fingers, my body, lovely arm, lovely throat. My throat, my little throat, my skin, my chin, mercy. Ah what a disaster."

And now they were knocked back as if by a hand, staggered. Now, behind them, it happened.

The sea stayed smooth. A wave of light stepped over the horizon. They lay face down, horror sorrow in the breast. Every throat choked. Terrified helpless whimpering as the glow on the horizon rose and rose and rose unchecked. Yet a yearning twitched in them. Onward! We yearn for the fire! Iceland's fire! Terrible beloved land! Leir-hnjúkur Myvatn Krafla: they're here. Fire soaring, soaring! They wanted to head for the island, yearning beyond measure: "What is life. Our fire. Our fire." Some lay, and would not raise their eyes to the blinding light, did not want to see the light. If only it would disappear. Gnawing fear, near to madness. If only you could wash it away. They're guilty. Away with the terrible

glow.

The leaders too, men and women, turned away, stood trembling, cursed. Beat their breasts: “I am not to blame.” Their teeth chattering, grinding, ears and nose cold, no sensation in the fingers. Sobbed; dragged numbed feet over the deck, stamped so as not to lose themselves. Eyes opening closing in uncontrollable rhythms. But then they pulled themselves together. Look to the light. The light, the fire, higher and higher over the endless vault of the heavens. The eyes must see it. Eyes on the blinding white soaring light. Swallow it down wide-mouthed like a drowning man the water. Take in the whole wave with a gaping whale-mouth, swallow, swallow. Hold muscles tight, keep eyes steady, legs planted firmly on deck.

And they managed it, the eyes did not screw shut. It was all right. Burning there was the Tourmaline webbing. Call a spade a spade. Tourmaline sent from the Continent, smelted spun mineral, clever work. It lay on the oil-clouds. These were no new inventions: Angela Castel had already used them in war. Here are the smoke-blowers. The things people can do. Feet regained sensation, they could move their toes, turn round, relax the shoulders. The Greenland mission was accomplished. Now scoop air slowly, breathe in, breathe in, breathe out. They looked sidelong, heads still low. People lay around them, hands over eyes. Paralysed shattered. Say nothing yet.

The vessels steamed rudderless for hours through lit-up water. Then the people stirred themselves. Raised head from breast, as if receiving judgement. Engines shuddered through the hull, pounded rhythmically through the limbs. Gazes glowered, not meeting, looked wondering into water. On the water lay an inerasable all-pervasive glow that made the waves glitter. It devoured the sky, the boreal vault. What had happened. They plodded on, straightened clothing, spat. Grim eyes. To work.

OBSERVATION SQUADRON

THE FLEETS assembled off the Faroes and Shetland. For days they lay idle. People were still morosely avoiding contact when an instruction came from the fleet leaders to form an observation squadron. There was no attempt to expedite the task. The gloomy the lethargic were not badgered. It was noticed that as in Iceland and around Greenland, despite the enervation, the burgeoning horror and shock, no one demanded a return to the mainland.

Two weeks later light craft set off. They were accompanied by a few fliers. They took the familiar route north, heading towards a growing brightness that their mood silently acknowledged. With each degree of latitude the brightness grew. It was a pink almost white light, spread across the northern sky and ocean. When the flaming ball of the sun disappeared below the western horizon, the reddish white glow had already risen in the north, more radiant every minute, its stunning brightness opening like a flower. And when they cruised at sixty-five degrees north, sunlight was no longer visible. It was overwhelmed by the northern brightness, like stars in daylight. In this new rosy light they floated on the floodlit ocean. A roaring took them in, enveloped them, a gigantic music, distant clear bass notes crashing and mingling, interspersed with tinkling clanging high notes. No sky overhead, just the even pink-white light. Now and then twilight and darkness came up behind; it must be evening and night elsewhere on Earth. Now and then the darkness was parted by a pale haze, veiled, to the south: this thin pallid grey brightening must be Earth’s day.

They stood on deck. They were travelling by boat, free solemn happy, happier hour by hour. Had no thought – it had been wiped clear in them – how it had come to this, what it was burning there, what had happened. They felt themselves absorbed into the tinkling high-pitched song, the thunderous organ sound. Light of blessing, of which they partook without becoming sated. They were already in the zone that once had been filled with icebergs. They did not wonder at how gently the water now flowed. As ever the air blew cool, sometimes cold. But several of those in the boats, as if in the Tropics, stripped to the waist, felt a sense of well-being, at night forsook their cabin.

The wind moved strangely over the wide ocean. The Greenland furnace was making itself felt. All the winds had changed. The sun-like fire at the pole sucked in airstreams as if at the Equator; they blew strongly northward often even at ground level. Air masses sliding low over the sea flicked at the sinkhole of the northern glow. They gained in strength with every degree north. To the swelling and falling away of the roaring crashing tinkling was added the gentle sostenuto hum of the air, its moaning calling singing. Air slurped at the sea’s surface, playfully pulled the caps off waves, with sudden gusts blew depressions, bored craters in the water, tore free with a shriek, surged raged helplessly on. Must speed on ever faster. Air masses at different heights became entangled; all must speed on. They rose vertically, at a slant, veered away; stretched themselves long, long. Disappeared with a lurch, a tug. Were swept away, sped flush with the surface, flattened the sea, pressed down so that the air piling up behind it in a house-high flood tumbled over and found its feet again.

As the people slid across the sea, their ships pouring powerful energy into the engines to resist the strong northward pull, often sailing backwards cleaving the whistling wind, now and then the air darkened under a fog of smoke. A slobber of unprecedented heat licked at them. They welcomed it laughing. So joyful were the crews of the observation squadron

that at the 70th parallel they could not be moved to proceed. They were supposed to approach the coast of Greenland. But all they wanted was to relax on the delightful water.

Several ships in the squadron were specially fitted out for hazardous duty, equipped with defences against unusual oceanic water events. These would be activated in the vicinity of Greenland and its collapsing avalanches so as to withstand the crash of monstrous glaciers, onrushing icebergs. The crews of these ships, softened and dazzled by the blissful water, the rosy light, spellbound by the gently nudging wind, went their own way. They put the elaborate equipment to their own use. They would, they decided, stay here, grub around on the seafloor. They wouldn't go back, not ever. Nor did they want to go on to Greenland to await the delights of the new continent. On this spot, at this moment, they had their land. They felt strong and brave. The mulatto Mutumbo was their leader. They headed towards Jan Mayen at ten degrees west and above seventy degrees north. Their soundings identified a mountainous rise in the seafloor. Here in the shallows under the light of blessing, they dropped anchor. Once again, the leaders declared, the loathsome powers of the great townzones will be put to work for our own benefit.

Mutumbo formed a circle with his twenty-two ships and auxiliary vessels, and like a horned bull in a meadow began to gore the liquid ocean. The lead ships were sheathed now in panels of flame-resistant basalt that snorting cranes lifted high out of the holds, slate-grey plates clamped like rigid visors onto the hull. The plates were fitted from bow to stern, extended like balconies to make a platform over the main deck. Devices were mounted on each of the twenty-two vessels, to which a tangle of cables ran from the hold; they resembled herons and whooping cranes. A long thin neck turned on the plump firmly-nested body, extended forward over the bows, plunged down past the grey basalt cladding into the green-white ocean stream. The neck was hung with a thick long tangle of lines and wires attached to chains: they looked like a mane. When the mane dipped into the salt water, brushed against spraying whitecaps, the sea cried out like a sleeping beast stung in the jaws between open lips and teeth by a scorpion,. It tossed about, awoke, roared. And at once came to a boil: water rose from the raging surface in a hot fountain, a white shivering lurching cloud, shot high as it scrabbled blind, beat savagely about itself. And ever again, never ending, the cranes stabbed and bit, the manes cracked and smacked, furious boiling screeching spraying, steaming veering gasping, hissing high, roaring spume.

White cloud-masses miles thick, a mountain of cloud over the circle of ships, ready to collapse down into the steaming hole below. Squalls chased after them. The fountain of steam reached as high as the stratus clouds; it hardly felt the cold for the rushing squalls the ships sent on its tail, a cross-fire from exploding head-sized black inulite bombs, shot thundering from tiny mortars, splitting the air with a tremendous jolt. The soft quivering clouds felt themselves jostled, pushed back like a plate from a table, a dog from its bowl. And then they returned snorting, these white ragged fluttery masses, swirled together in a single downpour, a loose wide boundless downpour grey and black back into the leaping water. Poured down fast and relentless, so that flocks of seagulls were tumbled down by the wet hand pressing on their fragile struggling slipping bodies; all their fluttering neck-stretching sharp-beaked striving to no avail. And even when the birds still had strength to fly, they were choked by the shining fountains that fell on them from the over-saturated air. The sky, normally the medium for flight, its tenuous airy delights filled with sunbeams and the flickering Aurora, the sky torn apart by this volcano, this crater that spewed water, turned all its guns downward, hurled all it had down to the sea's surface.

The crane-heads bobbed and dipped all day long, the sea boiled, shot up in a white flatulent torrent. All day long the twenty-two ships toiled like horses galloping, hind hooves out behind them, to hold back the sea that tried to burst back in. As if driving wooden piles into earth, sinking iron girders into clay, shovelling sand from a pit, the ships heaved and braced, forced the water back. Their flanks were bare steel. But over the steel, held at arm's length on supports, a net had been spread. It hung vertically into the water around the stern, stretched from ship to ship, a single giant net, barely visible, no thicker or heavier than a hairnet. It was the dull white of lead, flecked here and there with brown or black. The flecks were mementos of the burned animals and humans who had made the net.

The main component of the mass from which the filaments were spun comprised a substance extracted from bituminous shale. In the factories it had been recognised that to fix this substance, formed during previous epochs of the Earth by rotting dissolving bodies living organisms, contact with living bodies was better than with dead. Torn from the Earth, exposed to air, spread out on wood and metal, the substance accreted too slowly, fizzled out. Plants, the sappier the better, fat animals and humans were the best substrate for enriching the substance. But these living bodies were severely attacked. It ate them away. As netting hung on arms shoulders knees – at night it was laid over cattle and horses, their skin shaved bare – they felt a burning. The wounded were replaced. The final five days of net-weaving, which took place in huge hangars in Mecklenburg, were a hecatomb sacrifice. People could stay in contact with the terrible white filament for only a few hours at a time. Efforts were made to fly in men and women from distant places. The newcomers, taken at once to the halls, were the quickest to succumb. Older workers, knotting wearily, lasted up to six hours. Then they lay fainting with cold hands, weak pulse, hollow cheeks. Foremen prised them from the webbing with glass hooks, rolled them aside.

It was on the final day that the brown and black flecks were incorporated into the webbing, as the net, miles long and wide, was knotted together from its five great constituent pieces. And as if the power of the net once it was spread out increased a hundredfold, all life in the vicinity was annihilated with a speed and ferocity that would have made the final knotting impossible had it taken just one more day.

At six in the morning the first eighty workers entered the hangar. By midday, on the grass behind the hangar, three hundred bodies were already laid out. But by five in the afternoon, the net now finished and suspended in the air from

seventy cranes, few new corpses had been added to the three hundred dead and dying. For from midday on, none who came into contact with the net emerged alive. In an interval that grew ever shorter from midday on, finally reaching as little as a quarter of an hour, workers and every other moist thing evaporated into the substance. Evaporated after emitting a little cry. Fingers clutched at the webbing, turned to charcoal. Six foremen tied the final knots wearing hot dry fur coats, thick fur gloves as the surest protection. The webbing refused to knot under such dryness; they had to sacrifice moist fingertips. One touch. And if they tried another touch it was already rippling through them. A third touch and they succumbed in their furry armour. Steam and fog from cylinders of fur. Empty shells on the floor, steaming neck-openings trickling smoke. Arm-thick glass beams like flagpoles had been erected, leaning back aslant into the air. On these the leaden-white net hung, invisible at ten paces.

Now it hung taut, forming a wall around the twenty-two ships. Where the net touched the sea there was – no sea. Empty space many feet across. Filled by air that on both sides of the net was more transparent than usual, and in sunlight much brighter. No insects or birds could approach this empty space. Water, the immense ocean, stood like stone, avid to fill the space, hurl itself at the ships as they slowly descended.

The circle of ships sank. The steam-makers excavated ever more water from the central basin, flung it aloft. The edge of the bank of ocean, lined with huge deposits of salt and seaweed, rose higher as the water in the basin vanished.

In a closed circle, like children holding hands, the colossal ships rocked up and down. At the bows, the sucking biting spitting cranes. At the stern, the ethereal net like a delicate smile aimed at the iron spellbound sea, the black wave-mountain looming groaning cracking in every joint. Soon the ocean hung like a mountain overhead, over the joyful people. The watery mass crashed slanting away. It stood foaming white against the net like a steed before the groom, before the net that rose untouched immobile higher and higher, already house-high over the decks of the twenty-two ships. So high were they encircled by the blackly swirling bulging groaning water-mountain. After five days they were in position in the still air of the basin filled with the blissful pink light. The people laughed. They launched boats. Mutumbo gave the signal to build bridgeworks across the sandbanks.

FIFTEEN VESSELS MET THEIR END

THE OBSERVATION squadron steered back south, at the leaders' urging. They had to flee from weakness, from possible breakdown. The crews implored the leaders, became withdrawn, insisted: the task is to reach Greenland; we must return north. But the leaders were afraid, and had enough sense to turn about. So the expedition sailed back into murk, into gloom. The gloom, shimmering haze, in the south often a dull black, came nearer, higher wider deeper. It approached like a gigantic cave. Here again was Earth, this special thing. They gazed groaning towards the north, the sea rippling in flames; how garishly the pink light shone. How it feasted on them, would not release them. The leaders themselves took over engine rooms, monitored the helm. The ships carried dragged resisting souls along. Already they were sunk in twilight; the ships plunged relentlessly ever deeper into the pale strange undulating murk. It grew colder. The leaders were astonished: they were back home. Expeditions were real, they belonged to the expeditions of the Greenland campaign. Shetland icebergs Faroes Continent townzones: all were real. What was that blissful power whose realm they had entered. It lit up the north. They ploughed on, lamenting. The sea was violently disturbed. Over Greenland a great fire was burning. They felt a deep dread: holy fire they had taken from the volcano island. Fire from the volcanoes that had made this possible: they were enraptured almost to the point of transformation. Mountains of flame had stamped their feet, terrible the blaze their breath now spread across distant Greenland – but oh the bliss. The bliss. They dreamed ensnared, they yearned; let themselves be carried back to the Faroes Shetland.

Crowds heaving saw them coming. Shock, fear and sweetness plunged into the heart when they saw the joyous calm faces, heard about Mutumbo who had used his cranes and pelicans to make space on the ocean floor, and would never until his death forsake that magical light.

Kylin staggered, took counsel with De Barros and other leaders. Then the decision was made not to disperse, the whole fleet that had endured Iceland and Greenland would be flung back north to prevail over the new situation, whatever it might be. The crews of the observation squadron together with a portion of the fleet would stay behind in the islands. "Have no fear," mourned those left behind, "we'd love to come with you. You're afraid to leave; soon you won't want to come back. Oh the things you'll see. Think of us."

Enormous fleet, on into growing brightness. Day and night vanished. Air gently bobbing quivering, distant rumble. Then ever more clearly a wide swelling music, high notes mixed with jingling crashing. Strange sweet joy that came over everyone the farther north they sailed. Smooth sheen of pinkly radiant water. What celestial things were these. They sailed small boats, took off their clothes, sighed, were happy. They wanted to see Mutumbo, squatting there by Jan Mayen. How clever he was, Mutumbo, they must go to him, embrace him. The air grew warmer, they continued northward. Sky white-pink, and the air around. Towards Greenland the light and its colours became stronger, were mixed

with red and blue. They saw lightning, surging fading brightness suggested flames, copper-red flaring, bluish darkening, smouldering flickering. Hot tongues of air in the warm wind. The tongues licked smokily over the fleet, coiled over the sea. Now and then they brought a heavy acrid stench of burning.

Soon remarkable sights met the seafarers' eyes. Feathers of seagulls and stormy petrels were piled by the wind on the decks of ships and boats. The feathers were of unusual softness, as if torn from very young birds, but their size and structure indicated fully grown creatures. Most were kinked, as if shrivelled and frizzled by heat. Then bits of leaf came flying through the air, strong-ribbed hairy leaves, unidentifiable, and small enigmatic plant fragments, possibly the wings of air-dispersed seeds. The surface wind continued to blow towards Greenland, but seemed to have no effect on ocean currents. Near the boats there floated colourful green brown red clumps that made them happy. They took them for floating algal colonies, detached kelp in which medusas had become caught up. But when they prodded these masses with an oar, probed among the layers, bright-coloured feathers came sliding along the oar. They grabbed at the bundled drifting tangle. It was kelp with living bryozoans, moss animals, nudibranchs, but birds lay on it, whole animal bodies undamaged, fully grown, hanging like berries by their little feet. And while they were observing this, living birds were already dropping onto the ships, whole flocks of bird-bodies slender and plump, all tangled together. Most were exhausted, died almost as soon as they were picked up. At times they came by so densely that they rained down on the ships. Like the feathers carried on the wind, the feathers of these creatures were of extraordinary softness; they shimmered green gold violet brown. Many of the birds had the brilliance of butterflies, dazzling blue on the wings with a sprinkle of gold, body and neck tinged with purple above smooth white legs. The wings were mostly scorched, in some places completely charred; these birds must have been carried passively on air currents.

They approached Greenland from east and south, very slowly drew near to the clinking furnace. Up till now the wind had blown with varying strengths to north and west, licking into the sunlike blaze; now it dropped. Its slurping singing sobbing fell asleep; like an elastic band it lost its stretch, just now and then they felt a little twitch as it contracted. The droning hammering continued clear as ever. Restless air all around. They had to give up the playful rocking of small boats. Clumps of white cloud drove across the sky. The air often darkened. Gentle rain. As the air grew murkier, torrents of water fell on the fleet. Gushing, easing for moments, then so heavy that people went about blind. They kept smiling, the joy in them as if smelted from ore. They pressed on through the wall of rain, the air calm now, sky torn with brightness.

But from Greenland, from where the whitest light flowed across the sky mixed with blue and red, there came towards the ships in the jostling cross-seas, in the swirling splashing up and down, there came – something. A darkness among little blue flames. A round blob, moving slowly east, south, moving towards them, moving around them. A hunchback of ever deeper black, growing out of the north, growing towards them. The sea silent. The steaming ships silent. The darkness, still looming like a shadow, tipped over the silent sea as from a sack, a cellar opening. And now, to the south, far to the rear of the fleet, a flickering paleness appeared, golden-yellow dusty light; day was breaking. It was the usual gloomy dawn over the Faroe Islands. It looked so small, like a child's face at a window. On the ships they took it in with wonderment, turned faces dreamily to the west. The cloudy light-cloaking shield approaching from Greenland had now acquired a glimmering halo. The glimmer danced at the edges of the encroaching darkest darkness of night. Rustling, squally soughing, scrabbling, waves jolting. Flickering lights, blinding flashes through the onrushing shrouding blackness. Thunderheads bursting over the sea. With every flash more peals of thunder. Two drums: the sea, the sky; a hundred drumsticks rattling rolling up and down. The sky hung ragged black over the water, the sea moaned. Roaring struggling. Amid the lightless fog of battle only now and then bright eyes. Foaming seas high as mountains, greenish crests along their whole soaring width, as if moss-covered. The crest collapsed; the green slid shattering white over the tucked-in belly of the waves. Onrushing sliding, the wave grew with its thunderous advance. The sea, the wave-mountain rode shimmering green with outstretched arms across the ocean. Ran with the hurricane and ahead of it. The whirling tornado, casting green light before it, sped on. The body of the tornado, thundering between the sea's surface and the sky's blackness, cut a path southward at a speed of twelve miles an hour. It was a scythe. It was stronger than anything it encountered. It sucked the ocean high as a house, dragged the pile of water before it, shattered pulverised it.

It hit a part of the fleet. When it brushed against a ship with a sweep of the hem of its steely robe, it forced the ship below the surface, pummelled it with the piled-up mass of water, boiled and raged around it.

Edged with a glimmer, preceded by thunderstorms, the tornado sped across the Atlantic to the coasts of Scandinavia and Britain, turned west, traversed the whole wide ocean, reached the coast of North America, crossed Newfoundland destroying buildings, shredding trees as if with artillery, to burst onto the coastal mountains of Labrador. Twilight marked its path, the sky tinged copper-red.

The Greenland fleet fought through. The heated landmass sent out more tornados. Then they entered a zone of thunderstorms. The pink light burned ever anew. They pressed forward through cataracts of rain. The sweet yearning never left them. They accepted the tornados, the loss of ships. They desired no more than did Mutumbo to leave the region where this light shone. They recalled their earlier existence. How stubborn and hard we were. They wept, were unafraid to die here. When in the firmament the dark veil appeared that presaged another tornado – circles whirling in the veil – they prepared their ships. But even in the most terrible whirlwinds, those who manoeuvred beating and tacking never felt afraid.

They survived the zone of thunderstorms. Now they were close to land, where previously the ice-barrier had lain. Sultry warm air. Blinding brightness, harsh flickering day and night. Green brown masses floated on the water. The ships

often heard a calling snorting moaning from the sea. Some watches reported: we've noticed coherent movement under the surface, approaching hesitantly and stopping when it reaches the ships. Once a group of vessels was alarmed: people saw from the deck a well-defined yards-long stretch of sea violently threshing. A sound could be heard amid the crashing of water: squirling spitting moaning. They lowered boats, pushed off. The commotion in the sea subsided, they found only foam and shreds of kelp.

Most of the fleet headed north of the 70th parallel, level with Shannon Island. The East Greenland Current flowed here side by side with the eastern Spitsbergen Current. The water carried big strange tree-trunks of a tropical type. Once or twice a whole island of trees, clearly torn from land, passed close by. The trees were kinked and charred; some showed fresh bite-marks. Rowing around them they found fragments of leaf that seemed to come from palm-like growths. The ships engaged in livelier pursuit of the creatures causing the strange noises in the sea, which came ever more frequently. They must be unknown fast-swimming animals, whales, but with no blowing. Ahead of the fleet there once came an unusually violent bellowing and snorting. Six vessels went to investigate. Motorboats were lowered, sped towards the disturbed water. Water was spraying, but not vertically as from a whale's blowhole. Whatever was moving there spat horizontal volleys of water. The boats confronted the spraying water. And were at once capsized. From the sea emerged the back of a brown-green monster with gleaming scales, a long-nosed reptile, unblinking bird-eye on each side of the head, loose flaps of skin on thin forelegs. It rowed out of the water lifting its forelegs high over its back. The skin stretched and filled with wind. The snout lifted snapping, the body wriggled up from the water, the monster flapped its wings. Rose as dogged as a goose into the air, groaning spitting, low over the foaming surface of the water, vanished gurgling across the sea.

The unfortunate victims were picked from the water, now smooth again. Rumours of the creatures spread through the fleet. Unspeakable dread lay on the people who had seen the terrible thing. It was certain: they were surrounded by beings of this sort. It was these, maybe others, that had caused the fleet unease for days, swimming among the ships moaning vanishing. Horror seized them all. They no longer had the dogged tenacity of the Iceland expeditionaries. Weeks of voyaging under blissful light had mellowed them, tears and laughter came easier. Now they whimpered, sobs erupted, they crept about the ships, wanted to go no farther. What would happen. In their horror they remembered Iceland, the stomping raging volcanoes. It was those burning there above Greenland, they had created these beings. Away from them, enough. What are the townzones up to, damn the townzones, what have they done to us. They gathered trembling about the leaders, who themselves could barely keep their feet, urged retreat to the south. And yet with the fear of the monsters was mixed another fear: of being forced away from this sea, forced to begin a new dead life. They were afraid of their return. The leaders did not turn the fleet around. They let it proceed into warmer and warmer air. Gusts of heat blew onto people now completely ensnared again in the fear that had rendered them speechless in Iceland. They laboured to make themselves numb; but the rosy light tugged at them.

The water below flowed blue-green. Everywhere swirling and swelling, grubbing and spraying. Floating tree-islands came from every side, pushed through between the vessels, evading them; no boats were launched now to check them out. Startled, fists clenched, they watched birds fly overhead, bright singing trilling birds, whole flocks. No one thought to shoot them. They stared, formed no impression, stood expectantly, half mesmerised. Stretches of water were so dense with green brown vegetation that they had to sail around. Sometimes they had to clear a path through the thick floating layers. Animal bodies were woven into them, meshed with them: dead monsters, heads drifting on the mirror of the sea, peaceful lamblike faces with beards, washed by blue water. And in hours when nothing was happening, they were again flooded with the old happy feeling. Everything quiet, apart from the shrill cries of birds.

Now they were sailing through water of a dark red hue. The ships moved very slowly. For hours they simply drifted. It was very hot, not a breeze stirred. In the radiant skies they saw shadowy masses of cloud floating east at great height. The sea surface, lit with a burgundy glow, sometimes sprayed foam, but otherwise stretched smoothly away to the west like a loose dense carpet of lawn. This carpet, comprised of marine plants, was more tightly-knit than the brown-green one they had already passed through. Meadows, welling up from the depths, now and then reared glittering over the mirror of the surface, simulating land. The meadow lay calm; sometimes you saw a ripple bulge like a crease in clothing, then lie smooth again. The sailors watched in slight trepidation, always afraid the sea would throw out another monster. The bright birds occupying the spars perched and leapt on the purple meadows of kelp. Stones and lumps of metal big as a fist that they threw down just lay on the meadow. Small animals not normally found at sea, bats, could be seen dropping to the lawn; airy white butterflies bobbed over the wet kelp, whole clouds, flecking the meadow white. Then a blackish swarm scampered and rowed through the red. Little creatures, a kind of rat with coloured tufts on their heads. They hung suspended in the water, paddled close together, clung to the algal stems, looked round out of little black eyes, tufts standing stiff as a comb. Among them glittering blue cicadas, jumping but seeming also to unfold wings. It was these that emitted the penetrating drone that sounded from the vegetation through the great steady distant rumbling and rootling. Creatures climbed onto the ships, avoided people. People ran, screamed; gave little gasps of horror; but then they laughed, thought themselves childish.

Sometimes the reddish carpet divided, then closed again. Ever more little creatures slipped aboard the vessels. Butterflies and birds occupied every deck and spar. In the water, when the carpet parted, you could see larger yellow and blue-white beings swimming. They did not look like fish, more like seals with smooth shiny bodies; they fought each other and with huge invertebrates, nudibranchs, that clung to the surface of the water to breathe. The two front feelers of these creatures had grown to strong warty arms: with these as they dangled they grabbed at the swimming creatures;

their suckers secured the darting yellow seal-like beings, which quickly lost their colour, and hauled them in. The water around the molluscs was always slick with scum.

Savage choking heat hammered through the air. On the rocking ships they struggled against stupor. They clung to spars and railings, stared grinning about them. They were near to collapse. They dreamed: let it come, whatever. The chest tight. Then the air in front of them quivered. The quivering disappeared, reappeared in another direction. It seemed to be nothing more than a shimmer of heated air; they remembered it from Iceland, breath of the fiery sea and the lava streams. Soon the vibration appeared close by, with no increase of heat. Sometimes the surface of the purple kelp meadow, the thick layer of marine vegetation, burst apart: then the tall quivering of the air appeared again, drifted. Everywhere along the path of this quivering the field of kelp parted, quickly closed again behind it.

On one occasion the quivering airmass suddenly halted by a ship drifting aimlessly as if asleep on the meadow. The people on deck stared immobile at the strange perturbations. There was a humming around the curiously swirling air. Then they sniffed and wondered: a smell of tar and brine wafted in bursts over the ship. They watched as the vibrating mass drew near, as it grew out of the sea, saw that it was veined, indeed pulsating. They faltered. The airy being – now they could see it, were astonished but not afraid – floated high as a house on the sea. It was filled with small black entities, dissolving; these must be algae and living things trapped in its entrails. Birds, butterflies abandoned the ship as the transparent gelatinous structure approached, blue cicadas and bright-headed rats jumped squeaking away into water. But the mountainous being blew its tarry breath more strongly over the ship. Altered – now the people stood petrified, fell fainting – changed its position, bent its top forward. There it had a mouth-opening like some plant-animal, surrounded by a garland of flicking ribbons, a heaving glassy vault from which came blasts of tangy salty breath. The ribbons unfurled over the deck, wound themselves around spars girders people. They tipped the ship sideways, pulled it towards the creature's deeply recessed mouth. The ship capsized. It sank into the water, was caught by the gelatinous vault that pushed itself over spars and decks, closed over them. The ghostly medusa stood upright. Ribbons waved vertically in the air. The girders of the ship along with its massive steel its living beings were dissolved by the convulsing entrails as they swayed high and visible over the sea, were incorporated into the creature. Black specks floated through the delicate veinwork; the outer sheath was strongly creased. The shimmering flickering of the air faded. The creature sank back. Plunged on its side into the sea, slurped water. Purple kelp closed over it.

Fifteen vessels met their end on the hot red meadows. The main body of the fleet fled. Some ships sped across the sea of kelp, were held fast by the fauna, were left rusting in the desert of flora. The others dashed east, south.

UNDER THE SHROUD

GREENLAND lay under the shroud placed by people over the eight hundred thousand square miles of the Earth's surface that jutted from the Pole into the Atlantic Ocean. Current from the Atlantic cable streamed through the net, which surged up from the buoyant oil-clouds, from the embayments and blisters in which it had gathered. The tension kept it stubbornly aloft, swaying and shivering like an animal facing the trainer, with his whip and hard eyes. Sections of net twitched in pulsebeats. Exploded. Sparks flew. A spurting rattling around the broken places. Stabbing flames waist-high thigh-thick, blue then whiter, buzzing upwards in reddish spirals, sinking jagged back together, fading in every direction. Everywhere the net was melting. Flames spread. The fire flew outwards in circles that expanded at bullet speed. A great swathe of land was bathed in a thin layer of flames. Light from these hardly penetrated the black oil-clouds; the mountain peaks were lit up only weakly. Now the plates beneath the woven Tourmaline shroud began to deform. They were melting. The light grew brighter above and below them, the heat increasing all the while. Suddenly a flood of flames erupted rampant from sea to sea over land and mountains, swelled and grew together into a wall. The gas-clouds were shredded, the drifting weather-clouds vaporised. Unearthly glow, bright as day. Thunderclaps in their thousands assaulting the zone of light. Lightning jagged through pink-white air. The air shook its burden of water down onto the Earth. A gale roared into the fiery heat; could not embrace the burgeoning flames, flinched back, flowed warm and contented. In the sea stood supports for the webbing, fragments of netting, still resisting the heat. The entire net rested on the oil-clouds of this narrow fringe.

The heat, enormous unleashed beast, plunged to the very depths of the icy land. Huffed at the land like breath on a windowpane. The air below grew foggy, vapour rose. The land swayed under grey and white clouds which, transformed to steam, imperceptibly climbed in hordes over the snow-plain, snuggled against the flanks of mountains, coiled seethed. They swelled swirling, eddies stretching away dense as milk, concealing the land, a rising gassy sea. Tendrils of vapour felt towards the heat. The white sheet of inland ice was drenched in damp. Dripping water tried to congeal again on the ice, but the heat held it, kept it soft. The ice-sheet had to surrender more. Runnels all across the plain. The snows of the desert disintegrated. Miles-wide expanses of slush were shaved by the heat. They flattened. Their pure white face, their filmy softness disappeared. The land took on a darker hue. Streams spread, chasms in the ice into which torrents emptied

raging. Hollow crackling creaking in the enormous sheet of Greenland ice came humming to the surface, shot free. Crevasses opened.

Above it sat the great Power, summoned by a spark of the cable's current. It was visible to the eye: a reddish brightness streaming, no longer climbing. Mountains, gouging rivers, blue firn, deserts of snow, glaciers, eyeless earless without sensation, became most intimately aware of it. Heat, the great Power, did not stay above: it penetrated upwards downwards sideways, pushed into everything solid unsolid. It fell on all things like a sickness, or like love; they succumbed and swooned. It seized the mightiest the smallest, the hard the liquid, like a shout in a valley it came echoing from all sides. When the great Power came down to land it ran in the veins of all things, softened them, caused them to swell. Nothing was stronger than this. It knew nothing of fjords glaciers coastal ranges icesheets streams snow-covered plains, was blind to the gigantic the expansive; it made its way to the tiniest, there found access.

In Store Karajak glacier it recognised water that could be turned to vapour. The grandeur of ponderously advancing Assatak Tuarparsuk Atlaksoak was as nothing. Blue the ice of the firn, a greenish light played in the rifts, plains of slushy snow stretched white into the interior: all was water. And could become vapour. Into gaps in ice mountains glaciers, into invisible gaps in the flowing fabric of streams lakes brooks springs, heat infiltrated itself. Harried them all to become gas vapour clouds.

Greenland rested on a massif of granite and gneiss, washed all around by cold ocean currents, on beyond seventy degrees north, between twenty and eighty degrees west. Beings that rose burning from the Earth's core, Silicic acid Magnesium Aluminium Oxygen had been seized by that other dread primal Power, Cold, and never released. Cold was the greater Power, mistress of immensity, filling the ether. Shaper, progenitor of forms from which Fire allowed its heat to dissipate. Vast darkness and cold that held the stars, mere sprinkles in her immensity.

The flickering of the nets over Greenland took up the battle with Cold. Placid calm was replaced by raging fury. High-pitched song of the flame-rutting nets; the flames seemed to turn everything, air ice mountains, into themselves. Water ran over the face of the ice. Rocky crags poking from the ice, nunataks, yielded their thin covering of snow, revealed black walls all the way down to their feet. Heat crept into the joints of the rock-hard structures of firn and glacier. It rippled over stored-up ice, the slowly creeping ice-rivers. The radiant Power poured into mountains like wine into a drunkard. Tightlipped they took it in. But Heat rippled in their entrails. Warmth permeated the burdened icy colossi, and everything that was in them felt itself seized. They perked up when it came over them, the new Power that they recalled from time immemorial. Firn disintegrated, sucking in air. Its hollow spaces dripped with water, expanded like lungs. It was tunnelled through with shafts and passages, undermined by vaults. It flowed away, the water into which it was transformed and softened. Merry white tinkling water. Foaming runnels in the firn-body; jingle-bells sleigh-rides. Water poured liberated from wide glacial gates. Washed gnawed at the blue-white pillars of glacial halls, warmed-up melting relentless water. Vaults and firn trembled at the pounding force. Springs dug panting through the ice, cut channels in the white walls. Overlong pillars ready to collapse dripped white water, always more water. Mingled with the tinkling clanging of the shrouding cloud came now the chuffing booming of dying collapsing glaciers and firn-fields. Through their bodies, across the ice-fields rattled an irregular drumbeat, excited water excavating. Haze lay mountain-high across the land.

Coastal glaciers speeded their advance. They thrust into fjords, pushed from behind by inland ice. Ice piled up on their snouts and backs. A surging sea of ice now covered the inland. Floes and slabs crashed together, piled atop each other, slid away splintering. Inland ice and firn had set off on their travels. They floated on thin layers of licking water. They had collapsed the vaults beneath them, but were unable to squeeze the water: it ran ahead, carried the ice along as it surged. The ice-masses were melted from below: they had to glide, to float. Float on soft pliable water. Their strength had accumulated over millennia, in darkness, among long winters, short summers. Snow upon snow had fallen on them, borne on storms, melted, froze again. Wind no longer blew the snow away, ever more snow piled up on the ice, the mountains could not shake it off, ice tied them in, grew over their heads, besieged them. And then the land was but a footstool for the icy mass: it squashed down smoothed all wrinkles. Now it was shaken loose, rose uncertainly from its seat. And was not alone. It could feel a shoving at its back, was lifted up, sent skidding from its place, levered up from below. Out of sight still, the mountain walls valleys deep in silence, pushed up by the Earth to prevail over encircling seas. But the burden on them was disappearing. Valley basins were filled with migrating ice, ridges were climbed and overtopped. Now glaciers from inland were wending their way to the coast. Like a lady stirring up street dust as she gathers her skirts, sluggish ground avalanches took the measure of the Earth, unpicked crags and incorporated them in their mass. Flowed in heaps around the nunataks, nicked them, ground them, pulverised their debris.

Water, the great element, fought over in greatest savagery by Heat and Cold, was on the scene. Dripping white muddy masses; this washing loosening dragging hurtling plashing. Water leaped ahead ten times, slid away, fell over, hurried on. With Heat it penetrated into glaciers the Earth, made everything loose. Veils of mist, damp gassy seas descended. At first as rain and then as rivers, water returning to the land. The last snowfields succumbed to the wet. Firn and glaciers that had not emptied their moraines into the sea could not stay where they were. Splintered and flowed, shaken up by soft water.

Mountains hills plains of the age-old sunken land, flooded, covered by mile-high seas, cataracts everywhere, now revealed their ravaged face. Glaciers still plunged seawards over mountains; fell sagged back onto land. More glaciers, blind, groaning, swept on, their surface rumpled, and already they are flooded, lamed by the wet, come to a halt by crags, stumble, pile up against the rock, sink back, purr, grow smaller greyer, mere ice-floes floating away.

The land transformed itself into a desert of boulders. Lakes steamed, rocking with crumbled ice. The last remnants of glaciers grubbed in their depths. The inland now smooth and placid under the glowing air, here and there a few steaming hills. Water surged to the coasts, where glaciers had erected a wall of rubble and the dirt they carried on their backs. The waters had to break through.

The day when the first observation vessels came over the sea, the Earth moved. In utmost placidity Greenland, rocky massif projecting from the Pole out into the Atlantic Ocean, rose up. Lifted like a cork that has been pressed deep under water and then released. The land was free of the mountainous burden of firn and glacier that was the inland ice sheet. It lifted gently. Lifted from the heavy fluid masses of Earth's interior that shifted it into its new position. The land, mountains plains hills coasts, pushed up high and ripped apart from north to south.

Within a few days everything was settled. Greenland, just now still a continent, had split into two great islands separated by a shallow sea. Smoking islands slowly rose from the water. Other islands disappeared. A deep sea passage penetrated into the western greater island.

EMERGENT LIFE

IN THE GIGANTIC circle of fire whose light was now dimming, whose heat was ebbing, Earth embarked on migrations that brought it closer to the heated isle. The world around Greenland invaded the zone of flame as if it meant to extinguish the fire. A rampart advanced on the islands of Greenland, dense enough almost to wall off the sea. From fringing regions huge stocks of living matter drew nearer to the furnace, ready like fire or water to infiltrate any space. They filled the air. Soon a lawn was there, a deep meadow miles across, soon a forest on the sea, a green sea-mountain pressing on. Whatever could not grow fast enough down below pushed itself to the surface, released creatures that scuttled swam flew. Layers of vegetation miles thick bobbed purple green brown on the sea. When they drew near to the hottest radiance, they were so dense that water penetrated only in channels; their surface was dry, washed only occasionally by a breaking wave.

In the west trees were pushed up by the rampant kelp; lessonia man-thick, with scarlet leafy crowns, twiggy branches dangling. In these water-saturated meadows, pleasant groves, countless creatures grew and died. Were incorporated in the mesh of vegetation. Hordes augmented the stock of vegetation. The floating meadow bobbed and dipped, pulled together, loosened. With every heave it seemed to breathe out thousands of seeds and creatures, sprinkled them on the water. They were snapped at by swimming things that lurked enchanted.

The forests and meadows of the sea grew into one another as a single breathing being. Fishes worms crabs tried to saw through leaves and stems; but the weight of the meadow was enormous. Creatures were squeezed flat, their juices dripped, mingled with white sap from broken stems, leached leaves.

The tangle around Greenland knew no distinction between living and dead, plant animal earth. Plant grew on plant, held slowly swimming darting animals tight with tendrils, supportive efflorescences; the creatures became part of them. The plants had ubiquitous siphon-roots support-roots. From tendrils and hairs they built drinking-ducts feet jaws; were both plant and animal. Crablike beings squatted on flowers. Sat quite still. From time to time they flicked their tail-fan at tendrils creeping up on them. With two curved sabre-like attack-claws they bored into the flower, tore wounds in the stem, inserted the mandible, sucked. Some plants produced tube-flowers; grey crabs lurked in the bracts; they inserted delicate mandibles into the ovaries; nourishment flowed to them from the plant-being's sap ducts. Sometimes on more open meadows they stepped away from the flowers; like a plant-part they spread and floated with tail-fans erect out of the calyx into water, and once again, when they were tugged and torn away, started boring with little twisting digging motions.

Other creatures sat there on the plants: spiders. They emerged from under leaf-joints, spun silk to cling tight on nearby stalks. Cuttlefish, huge bodies with many arms, kept their eyes closed. The muscular mantle lay still, was inflated stiff. The vegetative network had pushed extensions into the hollow body, surrounded the great veins, the creature was not dead, its heart beat; the hollow columns of the plants ended in its guts; the sluggish heart pumped the juice of other creatures, other plants. Stems leaves buds were strangulated, limbs of medusas sea-stars; here the constituents were sucked up, there they were already captured by another being that could make use of a stray medusa-arm as trunk thorn leaf-cover sap-duct. Fine algae penetrated nudibranchs, they were snails no more: a bush of algae slithered over the soft ground.

On the islands of Greenland, rosily radiant, everything had changed since the great upheaval of the Earth. The land had been squeezed contorted. Strata and rock masses from earliest times were now laid bare. Animal remnants seeds plants, fragments of an age millions of years ago, were once again exposed to light; but another light. The sun now hurling its super-tropical heat onto mountains plains seas was more savagely powerful than the old distant gas-ball. Beneath this sun that lay close upon them arose what just now had lain buried, dead. The sun summoned it.

Like the machines the Iceland expeditionaries drove over bridgeworks to bedazzle crumbling rock-beings, like outcasts addressed in the street in their mother-tongue, like an ailing woman who feels an embrace, a warm word, or like a people who were conquered and now find themselves again, weeping for joy – thus did the hot rosy light enter the rubble of ancient Earth, flow wash over it, impose itself. Shot straight to the heart.

A furious craving entered into things, made them bend and stretch. Rock strata slowly bestirred themselves. Plains lifted, everywhere strata became exposed, pushed high, overlay one another. More swift were mosses algae ferns grasses fishes snails worms lizards, large mammals. No new seeds drifted here across the sea; worn relicts of the Cretaceous, bones plant fragments found life again. The furious light baked together in bodies whatever it found. Confusions of bone, shattered skeletons in the mud sucked in the glacial damp, pulled themselves together. Mud brought them substances they could use to build their bodies, store up around them: earth, welling water, salts. Transformations took place in and on them, extending even to their body-type. The Earth clotted every residue and every relict into something living. So fierce was the drive to find bodies, to flow together and start moving, that everywhere the bare exposed surface of the islands burst open along whole stretches, here rolled together in a quivering mass, there, as if watered by rain, ran riot under tree-like forms. These were not beings that the Earth had ever borne before. Water salts earth agglomerated around exposed limbs, heads bones teeth tailpieces vertebrae, around fern-leaves pistils root-stumps; often these grew into creatures resembling the ancients of the Earth, often strange unknown beings turned this way and that, sucked at the earth, danced. They were heads skulls whose jaws had become legs, the throat a gut, eye sockets a mouth. Ribs writhed like worms. The living Earth streamed together around a spine, hardened. It was as if a network of veins radiated in all directions from the bony remnants, as if they were crystals, seed-points in a supersaturated solution. And what lay around the spine-thing, what was touched by the veins was grasped by it and drawn close, whether it wanted to become embodied or not. The worms that formed around the ribs, unless they fled were pulled by the spine-thing to its mouth, planted there next to its lips; they slurped and pre-digested for it.

Globular beings rolled down hills onto the land. They were a species of avalanche. The venosity played insatiably around them. As they rolled they baked into their body whatever they could seize hold of, sank veins into the captured material. Many of these swelling beings clung fast to a hill, grew into and around the hill. Their intertwined exploring venosities had gathered whole storehouses of little beings that agglomerated under snail shells and around little sticks of coral; the globular beings armoured themselves with these.

Cliffs were burst open by the rampant power of seeds. There were creatures that moved gigantically, ponderously, whole hills incorporated in their body. They carried along lumps of unformed soil that moved by themselves, trickled from them laying a trail of life. None thought of attack and defence; they hauled themselves up, bumped and rubbed one another, formed slag, put down roots all tangled together. Rubble grasses leafy trees palms oleanders conifers were touched by the light. They attracted everything nearby, it came to them like a leaf curling in a flame. Remnants of desiccated smothered laurel trees lay on exposed sandstone, among scree from cliffs blasted by the sun. Living soil was sucked into their leaf-ribs, around a network of nerves. Enticement came from the leaf-ribs, the nerves; the soil implanted itself among the ribs and nerves, layered itself in cavities, they became veined gaudy plants. Leaves rose from bare rock like cakes in a pan, broad and thick. They stood tall as bushes, the edges always turning as they sucked up earthy matter that flowed like heavy oil. The leaves stood erect, giant stuffed shapes. Often they began to move around. For under them grew armoured turtles, to whose backs they were anchored. And they wandered into the land on the backs of these creatures.

And landscapes stretching away, of succulent rosette trees with their dense foliage. They grew everywhere in the path of animals that spread their seeds. Grasses resembling trees shot up tall in dense thickets, impenetrable clumps, stalk after stalk from a single root; grass-heads drooped like lofty weeping willows.

Often trees and animals did not pull themselves entirely free of the soil, stayed put, were an intermediate thing between proliferating earthy matter and living beings. Often they dragged with them lumps of earth to serve as egg yolk, in pockets, whole sackfulls, on strings like umbilical cords, and when the yolk-sac became empty they fell prey to others.

Shrubs often confronted one another with threatening arms, seemed to want to kill each other. Then the movement broke their branches; they collapsed liquefying; their nourishment flowed into all the others; a larger creature stood up.

Lianas hung between gingkoes tulip trees. They spared no time to build leaves. Clinging flush to the tree, climbing around the trunk, they overtopped it. They enveloped alien leaves in their twining. They were greedy relentless beings. They secretly grew into the tree; it was their placenta. They received the juices of the Earth pre-digested. As the tree shrivelled under them, they sported their flowers like flags.

Silent gloom of the forests. Pillars of leafless trunks striving vertically into the air, seamless roof of foliage; stripes of rosy light falling through. They twined like corkscrews around the woody vines of parasite plants. The vines joined trunk to trunk, crept over animal creatures and hung down from them like bats. Animals tore free from trees and ground and shrieked through the forests.

Plane trees on hot flatlands, mangroves breadfruit trees. Giant ferns stood producing offspring like inexhaustible mothers and fathers. Their leaves radiated in a circle like spokes of a wheel. These plants produced live births: buds sprouted on the underside of the sturdy leaves; seedlings dangled from the leaves like threads.

Trunks collapsing all the time. Often they broke under their load of leaves and animals, and liquefied on the ground. Sometimes their fall was incomplete; carcasses stood left and right; stronger beings enveloped them. New growths sprouted in the gloom and darkness, raised their canopies above the tops and crowns of trees and spread new rustling

foliage. The forests, protective of animals, raised themselves high like shields. Often under the heat the colourful woody mass caught fire, fell burning to the ground. Slurped and sucked again, cast new darkness beneath it.

Giant beasts crashed through the forest, trampling everything in their path. Itinerant giant blobs of jelly from the seas settled along the coasts, devoured forests and meadows. Watery creatures that bridged whole rivers, let the river run through their body, squeezed it dammed it and sprayed it out again. Ponds were lifted up and taken wandering with all the reptiles and plants they contained; they jogged in the belly of a wheezing slurping eyeless giant that twisted and turned and stretched itself long like a bottle towards the light.

The islands of Greenland, drenched in rosy light under the tropical heat, lay there not so much as land bringing forth living beings. The islands as they foamed towards the light were a slowly encroaching half-solid sea, topped by waves now green, now purple. Sometimes a flame shot through the waves; then the sea sank away black and smoking. Rutting flames ran in a jagged line across the islands, jumped narrow straits. They concealed little islands in the sea; when the smoke blew away the Earth was already in bright bloom again. Often the fire was not brought to the mountains and forests from outside. When the fury of the living wave grew too much, tree-crowns rampant sky-high above the ground, fire broke out in the restless bodies themselves. Little flames stabbed licked from branches buds. Lianas reared towards the light; their vines produced not heavy flowers but flickering flames that did not attack the plants but were fed from below, roared wider longer. Until a fearsome quarrel arose between the flame and the plant-being, tree-being. The tree pushed up more strongly, the flame worked its acrid way downwards. The tree's fury fed the flame. Away with the tree and the plants around it. Their raging nourished the flame. It wheezed itself up to become a fire. Flame raged with flame, roared into the air.

Flocks of small birds and insects emerged from age-old Cretaceous rocks. Gaudy parrots, sumptuous pheasants flew about, snapping calling. Cephalopods sponges snails emerged alongside them from the earth, slid into water, mingled with other creatures that chased them.

Saurians coiled street-long serpent bodies across rocks, plunged into water, beings pale at first, then streaked black-brown, with spines growing from a narrow toothy skull; they paddled rutting grunting in water with broad flippers. As these creatures swam they fought with others, had to assert themselves amid the jumble of emergent Life that trickled through them, beat about them. The monstrous creatures left the rocky plains behind, the burning smoking land where they were at first undecided whether to plant tails and feet in the ground, then pulled their limbs from the ground as from a dough and looked dully around, saw trees, sank their giant jaws into soft trunks. They stood heavy on the burrowing Earth supported on a muscular tail, rammed and felled trees with the two horns on the head. They took mouthfuls of trees as if they were grass, chewed them, crowns parasite plants dangling animals and all.

Long-necked hunchbacked monsters plodded singly and in groups through noisy valleys, across flatlands. Their thunderous whinnying scared even themselves. The back supported a double row of tall bony plates, a bony collar protected the throat, but the huge head moving slowly from side to side was sad, almost human. Water ran from the eyes. They pushed into the forest. But they quivered, stood still, flung themselves about when they were set upon by packs of foxlike animals that tried to insert themselves in eye sockets ears between teeth, and were shaken off, trampled. But the foxes kept running from behind and over their feet, leaping from trees when the monsters became entangled in a confusion of vines. They whinnied in pain, flattened whole groves as they threshed about. They tried to cool themselves in riverbeds. Many lay shattered there. But the Earth persisted in its state of arousal. And as they shattered, Life was already streaming and clotting about their limbs and setting off into the land.

Bird-creatures swooped from the highest crags onto this living blaze. Necks like gazelles, wings spread wide, they carried entire meadows and trees on long crocodile heads. Mole-like creatures nesting among the flight feathers stayed with them as they flew. These teeth-baring bird-lizards needed no horns to ram and spear: fragments of mountain that they carried on their heads thrust out points as hard as stone. They were assassins, these flapping clawing swooping beings that appeared over the blaze that was Greenland. Their fury was more terrible than the fire, they ripped open itinerant jellies, crushed animal masses that sank beneath them.

The life of the island had pulsed upwards. Now it began to flood overflow unstoppably outwards. Flocks of birds took flight. Legged creatures fled before the whirring crushing monsters. They tried to swim across water. Fled over the meadows of kelp. The animal mass rolled south east west.

PART EIGHT:
THE GIANTS

MONSTERS COME ASHORE

TOWARDS THE year's end, monsters appeared on the west coast of Scandinavia. A little later they were in British waters, turned up off Jutland and Brittany. The townzones, still in the hands of powerful senates, had closed the northern and western borders when the great expeditionary fleet came scurrying back. Only a mangled remnant of the expeditionary corps reached the coast of Europe, at Boknafjord north of Stavanger; it was swiftly secured. The main body sped south to the old gathering grounds in the Faroes and Shetland. Already that autumn British commissars had set up a defensive line against the suspect fleet, from Oban south of the Caledonian Canal to the Moray Firth. Reconnaissance vessels dotted the North Sea and the entrance to the Irish Sea. Unhindered, utterly unexpected, the Greenland monsters burst in, extravagant horrific beings, creatures misbegotten by the immense forces unleashed on Greenland by the dreadful webs of fire.

Hordes of huffing snorting beasts swam flew over the ocean, reptiles long as a street, black-bellied, some with glittering scales, some piebald with wide blunt snouts, some armoured like crocodiles. Bird-beasts with double rows of long sharp teeth. They drew near in packs, singly like fortresses or ships, bearing a mass of rocks trees creatures. They swarmed half-hidden beneath the jungle on their backs; claws swiped at mosses and horsetails growing down over the eyes. Now and then flying lizards dived into the waves to put out flames licking at necks, backs. They sped on, as harried as any hunted game. Between the toes, on the flapping vein-webbed flight membranes, battles were fought with the creatures they carried with them. These clung to the monsters' claws, hung in rows chains garlands from swelling dewlaps. When a monster dived, most of the passengers were swept free, swam to the surface, struggled to regain a foothold on the re-emerging monster. Diving into the sea the migrant monsters washed off rotting carcasses. But carcasses came with them, under them.

When two monsters made contact they fought coiled tore at one another. The farther they came from Greenland the greater the peril. They fought amid waves, hungry, often could not tear free of the defeated adversary clinging to their trunk bristles horny plates. They lurched on, bound to an oozing cadaver already sending its filaments into them. As the monsters crossed open sea no longer lit by Greenland's rosy light, as cold seeped into them, they became uncertain. Swooped up and down between sea and sky, fled from waves into clouds that no longer warmed. Their eyes were weak under the sun's dim light. Some turned back in confusion.

But new flocks hurtled into them, forced them on south. Greenland flung out endless living masses like a blossoming tree its sun-dust. They crashed onto Scandinavia, the first land they encountered. Fjords, granite gorges, not much grass, snowpeaks behind. Hunger fear drove the monsters harder day by day. They scrambled up cliffs, swamped little human settlements. Many spattered onto land like waves of the sea. Survivors began to bite chew gulp at the ground the cliffs. Tore their gums, teeth broke. Moaning menacing they flapped up from their stony prey, lashed out with their claws; nostrils flaring they snapped at scree, rocky rubble, trampled one another, stuffed themselves with ferns. Stones scraped gouged the intestines raw. They turned about, spewed.

A flock of birdlike lizards came to Bergen, humped like dromedaries, long-necked two-legged winged monsters emitting shrill cries as they approached: it sounded like giggling. They demolished streets and facilities. Along with rubble from buildings, they stuffed humans into their jaws. Fires broke out around them. Now and then the jungle of ferns and club-mosses on a monster's back was caught by the flames. Burning creatures danced a swathe of destruction through the town.

At the same time a curious sort of fish emerged from the sea at Bergen, creatures of extraordinary length, longer even than the lizards. They were overgrown wormlike narrow things with a backbone, skull ribs vertebrae showed clearly on a fleshless body. They seemed maddened by hunger, were half-blind. They struggled like snakes silently up cliffs out of the sea; there was no end to the body. Their breathing laboured as they adapted to air. But many came too quickly from the water; the lanky body swelled suddenly, twitched, hung limp on the cliff, innards spilling through the snout. Bird-lizards fed on them.

None of the monsters came far inland. Flew a while, sank to the ground. Contact with the cold stony Earth seemed to drain their last reserves of energy. Though hunted by no one, no Scandinavian monsters reached below the 60th parallel by land. They ate trees clods of soil. Then lay prostrate. Hauled themselves up, ran as if preparing to fly, died. They had long since devoured every unburnt jungle garden bird mollusc. The Greenland monsters chewed into the ground as they died. Then grew strangely in their graves. They lay still, the soil they had swallowed heaved in their mouths, out between their bird-jaws, from the gullet, intestines, permeated soft parts with long sharp crystals, absorbed the soft parts. And the ground quaked around the carcasses in the shallow graves, sprouted bundles of fine crystals so that the giant carcasses lay in jagged nests. The bodies of the monsters themselves were merely curious hummocks in the ground, stretching away like recumbent cattle over mountain slopes, fields, attended by glinting rocks.

The monsters that made it farther south – coming ashore at Jutland, turning up near Hamburg – were jellyfish and medusas, with arms that fused to form powerful paddles. The huge strong gelatinous beings danced in a wild thronging quivering confusion over the lowlands, the sandy coast. Under the light of Greenland their bodies had bloomed transparent; now in the cold of the sea they had taken on the yellow of egg-yolk, threaded with bloody swollen veins. They rolled on hissing, contracted in a spasm, leapt flew on. They sprayed slime around them, began to shrivel. They

loitered at rivers, sucked water in. But this water was but a memory of the water in which once they had thrived: this was heavy cold unloving water. They sucked it in, spat it swirling out. Their arms felt for stones in the road, mouth-openings choked. The stones uncrushable, they tumbled through the convolutions of the gut. The ghostly beings sank onto the land. Blood trickled brown and violet from them; like huge spider-webs they sank onto the plains of Jutland.

Any who touched the web, anything caught by the spray of steaming frothing blood, at once was changed. Flocks of sheep licked spray-drenched at the blood. The tongue swelled through the teeth, flopped to the grass, spreading blanketing. A sheep stood tugging at the dreadful organ as it swiftly choked. Pulled back glistening bleating from the mass of red flesh swelling endlessly from the mouth; gums and jaws too swelled in contact with the fluid. Expanded, arched high. Giant skull far exceeding the body in size and weight, borne on a neck too weak to hold it. The sheep all stretched out on the ground, their little remnant rumps twitched. Quickly other animals arrived, lapped greedily at the medusa-blood; within hours the body ribs spine were burst apart by swelling entrails.

The first major human casualties occurred near Hamburg. Settlers and townzone-dwellers were caught up. Houses were spattered by arcs of blood and slime from expiring monsters. People touched by the spray on head or limbs at once lost consciousness, choked by their own rampant organs. Indoors, when a hand was spattered, the whole body was absorbed by the proliferating fleshy mass; the hand filled the room, arms legs torso squeezed smaller smaller behind it. Heart no longer beating, the person lay pale and dead, no bigger than a fist, or an apple, a paper bag shrinking away beneath the steaming giant hand, its erect hairs like spears snagged and bending against unyielding walls.

That crazy episode in the Settler hamlet, when a woman had caught the rooster and was taking it to the henhouse. The crowing bird's head, its spattered feet swelling suddenly clung tight to the woman's arms and skirt. She was tumbled over by the load; the bird's claws grew through the arms of the screaming yelling threshing soon unconscious woman. The creature lay on her, swelled bigger than a human. The head and feet grew. The body was still alive, just barely, for the feet had taken root in the sturdy plump woman. Organs sucked their substance from her; she shrank into her clothing. Was already long dead, head vanished into the collar, below the neckline. The sleeves empty husks, calcium in the bones sucked away. Some hours later the dreadful bird stopped growing. Itself already dead, devoured by its organs. You might see a pig's ears, a cow's muzzle grow through the rafters of a barn roof; they bellowed pitiably, then fell silent. Everywhere unconscious dying beings seized by the rampancy.

Along Hamburg's western border, on the coast, the migrating monsters laid waste to entire urban districts. Powerful defences installed by the Senate proved useless: they merely sealed the townzone's doom. The monsters were torn apart by burning projectiles, rays, but their body parts, spurting fluids, dragged the expiring body along with other spurting beings down streets, past gardens.

The most ghastly mutant forms appeared. Charred trees, their tops sprouting long locks of human hair, human heads rearing above them, horrible dead house-high faces of men and women. The tail fins of a sea creature that collapsed in a settlement outside the city gathered piles of dead material about it, harrows wagons ploughs planks. The mobile spraying steaming mass swallowed up potato fields, fleeing dogs, people. It bubbled like cake dough, swelled high, wobbled across the cultivated plain, advanced like a slow deadly lava stream. And everywhere treetrunks grew from the pulsing ever more bulbous mass, each leaf as big as a house wall. Arms legs poking from the dark glistening substance were made of flesh and bone, often clad in black bark, toes and fingers spread like leaf-fans. Long manes of hair spilled across the surface of the mollusc-like being, the steaming devouring slug; weeds and house-beams were tangled in the hair. Across the vales and ridges of the seething mass raced horses and carts, leaping people. They ran tore loose until they sank stuck fast, horses with their carts, people tumbling alongside. The horses were overwhelmed, grew swelling from the hind hooves, appeared to be shying but were being pushed rigidly erect. The whinnying drooling ceased, the eyes, frightened bloodshot orbs, rolled back. Forelegs scrabbled. Was it a treetrunk, was it chewing the leaves stalks bushes growing from its mouth? Planks from the cart swelled through its ribs. The carter swelled out from his seat, carried by relentless treetrunks, melted into them. Then everything carried by the primal being softened, spread out, contracted, formed a smooth sheet.

Isolated monsters, still vigorous, pushed across the mudflats behind the Frisian Islands. They surged maddened against the fires hurled at them across Jade Bight. The big leaping reptile would emerge through the flames with a volcanic roar. The green fire it emitted seemed to damp down human fires. It would reach dry land, crumple the devices and chew on them. But would be already shattered; would rage, drag itself for miles inland. Then out of the black bulky vainly struggling body, out of eyes nostrils, between the scales of the skin, there would erupt sheaves of stiff green flame. These roared the creature's strength away, it would snap twitch. Chunks would break away from the burning chugging carcase as it writhed and twisted. Amid the flames, toes claws teeth scales scraps of skin flew sprayed from the corpse; wings broke apart. The body parts rolled across the land, along the Weser, mingled with grass birch fir. Now giant trees were on the move; the soil beneath grew with them, swelled liquid, gelatinous, foamed high around them. The tree would pull its roots from the earth, stride forward, lurch, turn about, zigzag on, incorporate nearby trees into itself, drag them along. The tree would snort from many pores. Slow its pace, stand lame, the crown feebly swaying.

DELVIL'S NEW PLAN

THE ASSAULT of the Greenland monsters lasted all winter. People fled from the coasts in panic. The Baltic was thronged with shipping. In a few eastern cities the senate lost its leading role. The lords of the great western townzones strengthened their position. The throngs of Settlers streaming through raised accusing cries against the cities, shaken to the foundations by the horror of the Greenland creatures. Large parts of the populace were paralysed, as were their leaders.

And along with their fear, people seethed with a vague sombre sense of guilt. Even the most knowledgeable could not free themselves of it amid the horrors.

In London, senatorial power was in the hands of Delvil and Pember. With six other men and women they formed a dictatorship. From Brussels the stocky Belgian leader Ten Keir called them over. The Belgian townzones remained stable. But the dreadful swarm of monsters kept coming; the northern and western outskirts of Brussels were reduced to rubble. To the rage that united people here was quickly added hatred of the Settlers who had agitated for the Greenland venture, and of the English leaders.

Incandescent Ten Keir received frail Delvil in his underground office. He meant to let loose on him with ire and vitriol, as the door opened shouted mockingly: "Victory! Victory! Greenland is melted! We are liberated! Let's load people onto ships."

"Victory!" Delvil countered. "We've won. Who has not won?"

"What does victory look like, Delvil? You dared to cross the Channel. You weren't eaten. Congratulations on your great victory."

Delvil slammed the door. He sat down cool and calm. "Those who kept their nerve have won. Yes, I flew across the Channel. I saw drooling creatures, and spat on them."

"Congratulations, hero! Take a look at Ghent. Did you see Courtrai? You must have seen it. Destroyed ten days ago."

"Ten Keir, we seem to have changed places. That's all right with me."

"And what will you do?"

"I am a man. You think because I'm frail I am no man? Let the creatures come. For now I can't defeat them, not just yet. We were unprepared. Wait a day, five days."

"You think so, Delvil? These are no ordinary creatures."

"They're animals. Animals, nothing more. Other challenges have confronted humanity, and we have prevailed." Delvil stood; he was pale, his face pinched: "I am a man. You won't persuade me to the contrary. I came here with Pember to ask you, Ten Keir, where you stand. If you're giving up, tell me. I must know what I'm dealing with."

"I really don't need your questions. If you are bitter and we are horrified and our cities are already half destroyed, you know who's to blame."

"I want to know what I'm dealing with. This is not a lawcourt. I didn't conjure up the creatures."

"It's Greenland. It's the migration of Settlers to a new continent. Our liberation. Salvation from ruin."

"It is our salvation from ruin. I didn't want this. But OK. We know where we stand. Say you agree, Ten Keir. I'm waiting."

"Better not speak. Open your ears to what's happening. No one knows what's happening."

"Tell me, yes or no. I'm fifty years old. Millennia have toiled for us, thought for us. You made it all clear to me once. Now I see it. I am human, I'll never stop believing this. And you?"

"Neither shall I."

"Then give me your hand. Now you'll become as angry grim hot cold as I am. You'll soon feel it. Now you won't sleep at night any more than I do, for rage and despair. You'll gasp and groan in the dark. Listen, Ten Keir! You'll know rage and shame. You'll curse yourself, as I do, that these creatures can do this, destroy towns, our towns, attack our facilities so Settlers laugh in our faces. I curse myself. But not for long."

Delvil pulled back his hand, shook it as if it was too heavy, glanced at Ten Keir, stepped back to the wall where the light-eye shone out.

"What are you people planning. What is your plan, Delvil?"

"You felt my touch. You know. Only two things matter: the creatures, and us. I don't want the creatures." Delvil's breathing was heavy. "I say to you from the bottom of my heart: I don't want them. Already they're not here. They're gone. Already destroyed, by me, because I want it. I only pretend to flee from them, to strengthen myself. They no longer live, Ten Keir. We have defeated them. Give them a few days grace, a couple of weeks: grant them that. Let them take a look around the world. Our world. Then it's all over for them. Over! Delvil says so. He's had enough. The table swept bare. Smooth. Empty. Like a mirror. Like a breath. Not a speck of dust!"

Ten Keir squinting in the cone of light, his front all white: "I'd like to believe it."

The man from Brussels tried to detain the powerful Englishman in the town, but he crossed the Channel back to the British Isles. People were pouring into underground spaces. They saw how dangerous the soft earth, the open air had become. Heavy concrete slabs, caves dug into massive bedrock were impervious to the creatures. Hordes fled to the interior of the island. Delvil watched in scorn and rage. His first act on returning from Brussels was to plant heavy

weapons along the western edge of the London zone. He trained flames and rays on the chaotic mob. His megaphone screamed at them: he is the dragon, the dragon is coming. And already the hot breath was on them: not from the mouths of giant amphibians, but from his devices; the crowds were scorched broiled burned. Delvil turned them to charcoal. He directed his loathing at the Settlers singing their victory over the towns: what had the western senates achieved in Greenland, where was the new continent, what wastes had been created; worse than the Urals War. And how it was rebounding now on the towns: no new land, and even old land is being laid waste.

Delvil's rage cracked over them like a whip. They had to flee the dragons, and flee from Delvil. He pulled together a band of men and women, fanatical followers, loyal to the cause of the townzones. They called themselves Rescuers. Around the towns of Britain they drove people into cellars and caves, forced senates everywhere to excavate the ground, construct concrete blockhouses into which people could scurry.

In open country, in the Scottish Highlands, they proceeded with redoubled fervour. Delvil had drummed into them: "These beasts, these monstrous amphibians and dragons are a calamity. We did not summon them. We were forced to go to Greenland. We had no way out. Our land was reverting to barbarism. We were on our last legs. Now these reptiles have come, monsters, to ruin us. Vengeance on those who brought them forth! Vengeance on the criminals. Kill them! Cleanse our land!" Laughing, his diaphragm heaving, he watched them fall in great piles, the instigators, the arrogant teachers of new wisdom, these "rescuers" of mankind. Now there were genuine Rescuers. Delvil's view went out to the Continent and America: we must seize the moment to shake from our necks this rabble that has made our lives so hard. We must view the Greenland expedition in the right light. It has turned out well. It enables us to place western mankind on a secure footing, sweep away all the parasites that cling to it. We wanted elbow room: now we have it.

Meanwhile he and his friends looked around for defences against the monsters. They were moved by cold loathing. The creatures broke through every kind of ray. It was no use blowing them to pieces: body parts wreaked more havoc than the animal intact. Who could come to grips with these beings and do away with them. The shame felt by Delvil and his comrades was profound, unbearable: they were like some primitive tribe, Bushmen, face to face with a tiger and no way out.

Not Delvil, but a nameless man from Oslo found a way. Following his rescue from a reptile attack in which he lost his right arm and shoulder, he discovered something surprising. He had been buried under an expiring beast already stiffening in death. His arm, sprayed by hot blood, began to grow. He felt no pain, only a curious surging and twitching in his whole body, a flash of lights before the eyes, in particular a pink glow that enveloped him in languor and sweetness and rendered him almost defenceless. But the surging and jolting in his body, his spine, in the knees and hip joints suddenly took on a dreadful insistent urgency. He said: a woman must feel like this giving birth, lying in childbed while the baby tears her body apart. Under the dull dreadful pain, already dreaming, he surrendered to the buoyant sweetness, his body remained attached, suspended on a ghastly stalk: it was his arm, a giant arm, a white bloated mass of flesh. Revolted, he took his knife, cut into it where he could with his other arm. Dug away to separate himself from the disgusting fleshy mass. The stabbing and cutting caused no pain, it was like cutting into a different body, close in to the shoulder. And suddenly he collapsed unconscious. This man from a Meki-factory was found two days later by a rescue team; he was still breathing, so they carried him back to Oslo, where with every possible precaution his shoulder was removed, for following the self-amputation it had swelled to a sack-like tumour. The man had shrunk to the size of a child, limbs soft as rubber; after the self-amputation the parasitic stump had continued to drain nourishment from him. It was a challenge to feed him, to put the right substances into him; the man, his skin brown-yellow and blackish seemed to have a completely altered blood. Even his eyes: the irises of his once blue eyes had taken on a grey-black hue. However much he wolfed down in his ravenous hunger, however much he drank he failed to thrive, lay freezing in his bed, this miracle of a being that the monsters could not kill.

But he told his story, for his wits were still intact, though always in a daze: of the lightning that had surged through him, of the surging and jolting in his body when the monster touched him, the stretching and tugging and tearing in finger and knee joints, in the vertebrae. That was all gone now. He had felt it still while the stump was sucking on him. The dreaming man, wrestling with the ghost of the monster, said: something's missing. He didn't want to eat, it was useless. They must give him what the monsters had, then he'd recover. He kept insisting, half unconscious. The doctors, working with electricity and many kinds of ray, could not improve his condition. As the man kept pressing and begging them to take him to Greenland, to the pink light the ships spoke of, it occurred to someone to investigate the mineral shrouds prepared by the western senates for the expedition. A total silence now surrounded this topic. They had been buried in giant underground vaults along Belgium's North Sea coast and under Welsh hills, completely unattended.

The Scandinavian flew across the North Sea accompanied by two adventurous men. Giant amphibians hissed at them from the Flanders Bank. The Scandinavian, close to death, already breathed more easily. And when they set down on the Flanders coast near a tunnel leading to the Tourmaline vaults, his look changed; he smiled, tried to sit up. The two men hurriedly pushed him to the tunnel entrance with some food supplies; they dared not go down, but whirled away east ahead of approaching reptiles.

Two weeks later the Scandinavian was brought to the Belgian Senate, with him a swarm of people enticed from their cellars. He preached the miracle of the Tourmaline webs. In them was hidden the soul of the living. He was almost as big as a normal man his age, but unsteady, over-excited, his gaze bold; the formerly blackish skin was now pale and transparent, the coursing blood beneath almost visible. The skin was peeling, the hair was blond, overlong, spilled over the shoulders. In the cellar of the Brussels Town Hall, Ten Keir listened only a short while to the strange raving one-

armed Scandinavian, gave orders for him to be sent home. In a flash he had linked together the dreadful monsters and the webs: could they use them as a weapon against the beasts. That very day his report was in Delvil's hands.

Delvil was back in London after his extermination campaign against the Settlers. That evening both men were in accord: the Tourmaline vaults must be placed under strict guard; no one to be granted access; the outside world must not know of the power of Tourmaline or that the webs are still effective. Ten Keir had the Scandinavian seized that night and locked up. Already rumours were spreading of the miracle recovery of a man almost killed by a monster: he let them spread as absurd fantasies.

A commission of physicists and chemists, Delvil among them, tested the Welsh webs. A fierce notion burned in him: these webs contain powers we can deploy against the monsters, and not only them! He was completely hooked. He hated this world, the Earth that had done this to him, the fantastic stupid fearless power that stood in his way and flung him about like a wild bull. It was not to suffer this that they had learned to despise ploughed fields, had thrown away the grain yielded by soil, cattle that reproduced themselves. The Earth's revenge lay hidden behind this, but it must be denied her. How proud had Iceland's mountains stood, its volcanoes clothed in thunder and streams of lava; yet humans had torn them open; humans had handled them like proud fliers free to soar aloft, and then you remove the air from under them – what use now the big strong aeroplane; and like ships that suddenly can't move because there's no sea there. What material for a sailor's tales, a flier's tales.

Delvil had Tourmaline webs brought to his underground laboratory. He forced the physicists, though members of the ruling clans, to undertake this dangerous work under threat of death; he had a monopoly of violence. These men and women, having escaped the fate of annihilation by monsters on the surface, could only acquiesce, approach close to the webs that had engendered the calamity. Delvil, within a few weeks turning quite grey, his face gaunt, summoned them daily to report to him. All shared his loathing for the monsters; but he too horrified them. They did not know that the daily summons was for him to observe, to check if they had found anything by which they might exercise power over him. He spoke only of his rage against the creatures, of the need to protect towns facilities people. He said not a word of his drive for revenge and extermination. If he could only do what the Scandinavian Kylin had done to the mountains: shake them, make them swell until they burst. Tear Greenland apart from root to crown, lengthways sideways. Once a Persian king whipped the sea because it broke his bridge. How well he understood that king.

At intervals that were sinister and unpredictable, monsters came down from the north. The carcasses polluted the sea. Delvil and his aides toiled in their subterranean London lair. They needed animals and humans for experiments. Delvil was happy when they made enough progress to miniaturise the webs, cut out little pieces, circles, leaves that could be stuck onto living things. He roared: "The monsters! Cretaceous! The whole Cretaceous! So what. Let them come. The more the merrier. They'll feel it."

Ten Keir risked a Channel crossing. Delvil received him among the physicists, embraced him effusively, whispered: "I'm no longer ashamed. The crisis is passing. God, what a time that was. I haven't lived, Ten Keir. Look at me, my face: twenty years in two months. They'll pay for it. I'm recovering, feel better than ever."

"You've made good progress, Delvil?"

"Let's be brothers." He and the Belgian strolled down the subterranean passage that was like a street. "Do you recall, Ten Keir, how you treated me when I came to you before the Greenland expedition? No, it's OK, you treated me well. I was still cosying up to the Settlers. You jolted me out of it. Good, I won't forget it. I was about to lose myself, about to join those dogs. How I'd have been howling now about reptiles and lizards. I no longer need to feel ashamed. Nor you, Ten Keir, my brother. Let's be brothers. The day has come. I'm so glad I've been spared to see it. Greenland is on my conscience, Iceland. I want to have more on my conscience. I'll make them fear me."

"Good, Delvil."

"No, not good. That's your word, not mine. What happened to me -." Delvil's eyes stared. Ten Keir recalled his words in Brussels: *"I don't want them. I say to you from the bottom of my heart: I don't want them. Already they're not there."* Delvil coerces phenomena. He hates them. The thought flashed through Ten Keir's head: this man has something in him of those grey gruesome monsters. His face really has changed since I last saw him: features rigid, deeply incised; skin the ashy colour of the concrete in which he spends his days; movements slow and insistent, no twitching; even his voice lacks modulation.

"It won't be enough for me, Ten Keir, to triumph over the reptiles. We'll see what the experiments yield. I'll seek them out at the place where they arose. I'll sally forth against them. They shall not survive. The ground that bore them shall not survive." Ten Keir tried to look into his eyes. Delvil went on: "We shall see. Our arms will be freed again, brother Ten Keir. Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord." He did not notice how the Belgian stood motionless, arms folded.

TOWER-HUMANS

AS THE WAVE of Greenland monsters abated during the summer, Delvil's aides achieved their first success. New weapons were put in place along the southern tip of Scandinavia, Jutland, over the North Sea, on Scottish peaks south of the Moray Firth. They were the strangest most terrible things the Earth had ever seen. On huge platforms in the sea, on Scottish hills – Cairn Gorm three thousand feet high, Sgorr Dhonuill, Creag Meagaidh – tall tower-like structures were erected. From a distance they were slender columns of rock with irregular protrusions. But anyone observing for a while would see the outline change, grow broader here than there, a protrusion now lay higher than before, or sank. Dark structures like flecked porphyry; some parts gleamed like wrinkled skin, others reflected light, shone like fur.

These monstrosities were erected on floating hulks, the peaks of Scottish hills, with the aid of Tourmaline shrouds. Rocks and tree trunks were piled together and allowed to marry. When they began to grow under the radiant heat and before the fires died away, layers of animal bodies plants grasses were strewn on the glimmering coals. Finally, humans were added to this base. Biologists and physicists of the Meki-factories were familiar with techniques to do with living organisms; they had quickly seen that radiation from the webs provided an unlimited and at first uncontrollable stimulus to living substances. The motive energy and growth force that lay confined in the animal-plant-rock body, the source of maturation in the animal body and then its ageing and death, streamed massively like a cataract from the vessels of Tourmaline crystal, endlessly. These primal entities that held the fire of the Earth and the stars were now fully in human hands. The nutrient and stimulant solutions that Glossing and Marduk had used for their work on plants and trees could now be dispensed with. Experiments made clear the terrible destructiveness of this force: it exploded every relationship, boosted body parts at the expense of the organism. It was like a flame seeking indiscriminately whatever moves, is at rest, hard or soft. In experiments on plants and animals they succeeded in targeting the stimulus stream onto the glands and fibre systems that the organism brings into growth from within. The organism's juvenile period was prolonged. The body was not destroyed. Settlers were seized and used for human experiments. The people who were now planted on top of the base layer of rock and timber were supporters of the Senate. Delvil himself had volunteered; they held him back. Enough came forward from his followers in the campaign to exterminate the Settlers in Britain.

Scaffolding was set up on the hulks and mountaintops, towers built of living substances. For the first time people stood on scaffolding galleries platforms over the base layer, directing, applying doses of webbing to steam blend coax animal and plant life out of the material. Such delight: engineers biologists physicists watched Delvil, who as always went about observing in high excitement. He had asked the Scandinavian survivor whether he would hold his tongue about the vaults on the Flanders coast. The man said no, and was taken to Sgorr Dhonuill in Scotland to be baked into the lowest layer of rocks and timber.

"Not a problem for you," Delvil smiled at the man when they brought him to the scaffolding; "you've already lain under one of the reptiles. There'll be no surprises for you. It's only thanks to the webs that you're alive. You'll serve a useful purpose." The longhaired Scandinavian howled in horror as he gazed down on the heaving dough, into which mosses soil logs were being thrown.

"This is happening, my friend, so that the others above you, men and women of ours, can nourish themselves on you. Will you hold your tongue."

The man's features were twisted in torment, but still radiantly fresh: "When I see your tower, Delvil, I praise the power of the Earth, which you will never conquer. I praise the great power. I feel I am with her. There is no boundary between me and her. I am not afraid. You want to dissolve me. Hands off. I go willingly."

And as he was caught up, naked, by a big crystal grab under his ribs that hoisted him over the dough, he sang his trilling fading hymn to the Earth. Then his dangling hands and feet, caught by the heaving mass, scrabbled clumsily in the dough. The grab opened. He fell onto his hands. Crouched as if to spring high, free of the Earth. But already vertebral processes were jutting from his back; the ribcage bulged like a barrel. His head sank into the mass; jostling timbers, branches absorbed him into their matrix.

The structure went up stage by stage. Finally the tower was loaded with the chosen human, a supporter of the Senate. The planting lasted weeks, weeks to embed a single human. The little naked wretched male and female bodies were dropped onto the deadly nutritive and support material, onto the eager popping stew. Projections and prongs of the lower tower, continually moderated by the controllers, slowly penetrated the legs and arms of the human bodies. The more vines and shoots from the lower tower curled around the body, the more feverishly the willing sacrifice was fed into the mix. There was communication with them: the speech of the sacrifices became thicker more babbling as the tongue swelled, they had to wait for the body the skull the jaws to catch up. A huge megaphone was strapped to the mouth; but it was not needed. The sacrifice, fearing the megaphone would become embedded, tore it free. The voice droned deep, sounded far away unclear distorted.

The builders of the living towers did all they could to keep the sacrifice alert. The bone-swelling brain-widening growth process, even though it proceeded slowly with remissions and pauses, endangered the tower-human's consciousness. Often they felt like surrendering their soul and their human nature, to sink into mere proliferation and rampancy. Until their voice was heard again, the eyes whose swollen lids had fallen shut opened, a sad questioning gaze was directed at the galleries where the little people controlling the experiment stood and signalled – with gaudy flags, later with signal-lamps: the tower-people were unable to focus on nearby objects. Each eyeball was bigger than a living human; the breath a hurricane from the mouth, which often hung open as if screaming. The jaw was at first too heavy, and sagged. Little food and only at long intervals splashed into the mouth, over the sagging jaws. The giant beings, laboriously gurgling and slurping, writhed in the animal-plant matrix. Legs from the hip joint and pelvis down were

knobbly and stiff; planted wide, extended massively down until they dissolved in strands, all fleshy character lost, down into the matrix. From there, fluids and nutrients flowed into the body.

Treetrunks and animal carcasses swelled through the skin of the belly, into the entrails, spread through the soft organs, invaded the intestines, melded with them. They pumped animal blood, plant sap into the intestines, which slowly rose and fell, contracted and stretched like worms. This was the movement spied by people halfway up the human tower: the slow to and fro of intestines, stiffening rising then relaxing and sinking back. Always dragging up along with them the loose wobbly slope, the climbing forest, animal bodies sprouting elongated out of the forest: oversized horses upright, forelegs buried in the animal-human's body, neck twisting out of the body to chew insensibly on leaves and soft branches. Cattle that seemed to leap from the human giant's belly, scrabbling greedily and apparently lustily at the grass of the forest floor below; but their body reared high behind them; what they ate was not for them; their hips and rumps were no longer visible, had vanished into the tower-human's belly, blended with it. Cattle chewed, and a giant mouth opened over them, a funnel sucking. A man's testicles merged with treetops and flowers; they streamed fluids into the organ to which they were attached like berries. Often the giant bent over with an excess of fluids, groaned and spurted semen.

The controllers continually moderated dangerous dreamy movements. Over the bare skin of the torso, in danger of growing rigid, they hurled chickens, swans; sheep with thick fleeces were spread over the arms. On a Scandinavian island they risked releasing two live lions, captured on the coast of North Africa, out of their cages onto the shoulders of a tower-human. As the giant – it was Quick Baker, son of White Baker, the Settler woman – blinked at them, they bit and clawed at his throat. This was the spot that needed covering. Now their teeth could not pull back from the bleeding skin. Their claws dangled, the tawny bodies hung slack at the crimson trickling neck; the hides clung to the giant, the lion-legs mere bumps on human skin. Above throbbed the yard-high head of the giant with its long swaying bushy hair.

Doltish almost dumb beings these, immobile air-snorting. Movements endlessly sluggish. Mouth nose ears were formed on the human model, but botched as if built of wood and stone. The blood of rocks and plants surged through them. Once the towers were complete, scaffolding cleared away, it was necessary on the hulks – really just anchored rafts – to pump seawater through the lowest layers of the stony mass, from time to time shovel more heaps of soil and plant material over the feet of the tower. Then the giant human could be left to the wind the rain, heat and cold. Those on the Scottish peaks were watered from springs.

Several towers as they were being built were destroyed by monsters. Construction continued at concealed locations along the Irish Sea coast. Almost a hundred were planted there, then another two hundred. They were towed north along the Scottish coast. Behind these, protected by them, the mountaintop towers were brought to completion. A defensive line of giants was laid from Sognefjord southward around the Jutland coast, across the North Sea to the British Isles. Human towers stood in the sea, on mountain peaks. The arms hung slack. At the breast, which was armoured, they wore loose white shrouds down to the navel: scraps of Tourmaline webbing.

And when amphibians, giant birds with toothed jaws, swimming dragons, migrating jellyfish came near, they felt drawn to the tower-humans. Bliss radiated from the webs. Any harried expiring Greenland fauna still moving nearby flocked to them, licked at the hulk, pushed snapping slurping at the tower-human's breast. The human construct's arms jerked faster and faster. The sad eyes above blinked, the forehead creased in a sombre frown. Now the arms seized the amphibian bird jellyfish medusa. The tower-thing was always hungry. It emitted a dull groan. Crushed the clambering beast with the edge of its elbow. The mouth closed. The head bent down. Fingers tore plucked at the yelping creature, hands grubbed in the soggy mess, stuffed dripping lumps far back into the steaming maw. And the lips cheeks dewlaps of the giant, the human tree, quivered as if it were about to laugh. The eyes blinked, opened closed several times.

The tower on the mountaintop crushed the reptile, the ravening dragon into the ground. The ground beneath it grew, new juices flowed up; it blinked, water dripped from its mouth. The thing roared a dull sad roar.

UNDERGROUND

PEOPLE IN the zones clung together under this calamity. Senates, already wary during the Greenland expedition and almost ready to form leagues, no longer bothered to care for the people. They were indifferent to the townzones. Concern for the emptying of the cities, for Settlers, was childish. Senates no longer feared the populace. They were armed to the teeth, only they could construct the devices. Facilities, their significance, the servicing of delicate apparatus – element-transmuters, transformers, power storage devices – all this was reserved to men and women of their own circle. They could bring the Meki-factories to a standstill and let everyone starve. And now these tower-humans looming over everything!

Senates were guided by demonic hate-driven Delvil. In London Brussels Paris Lyon Hamburg Oslo Copenhagen: "Let the townzones rot. Make room for us." The Greenland events acted like a sieve on the senates; now the last few waverers

dropped through. The senates called themselves Security Conventions. The words they used were old: “Salvation of the townzones”; but now they were not, as before the Greenland expedition, simply passive defenders of their cause. Escoyez in Barcelona said: “We’re autonomous. Nobody’s servant. Nobody’s custodian. If someone wants to rest in our shadow, good. If not, then not. Who has power has freedom. We have freedom. We know who we answer to. No one can force us to serve causes other than our own. Anyone who has other plans for us be damned.”

As many centuries before, members of the senates went about veiled and invisible among the people of the zones. What Delvil had undertaken on a large scale north of London – hunting down and eliminating Settler bands – was practised everywhere on a small scale. Individual men and women in the senates became savage, hasty. There were tensions among them; it was known that some stood with Ten Keir, who was being pushed to the wall by Delvil; Ten Keir, who wanted to follow the old path of expanding the townzones. But the new revolutionary stratum among the ruling clans would not let him come up.

The masses of the western townzones were driven from the surface down under the ground. Underground, the rulers could impose their total monopoly of power. Once refugees had set up simple temporary subterranean dwellings, the rulers in arrogant glee established factories devices weapons underground. Meki-factories in Hamburg and Oslo were destroyed by monsters: this provided the excuse to move all facilities away from the surface. Jubilation among the rulers where this occurred. Now we’ll show them what we are.

Masses of humanity dug themselves in against the rampaging monsters, were trodden down by these arrogant men and scarcely less masculine women. Like a tree, a forest with upward-pointing roots, the cities grew down into the depths. Thick slabs of concrete and rock covered the locations of former plazas and streets, or else these lay desolate. When centuries ago the Meki-factories appeared, people abandoned ploughland and forest, let them revert to uninhabited wilderness, concentrated in city-states. They clung to their devices like flies to a honey-stick. Now they abandoned even the old townzone sites. People lived as best they could, not like an anthill aimed up at the surface. They dug down into the Earth, made what they needed piece by piece, with their own hands. Nestled in the Earth like a family of beetles deep beneath the bark of a tree; dug themselves in ever deeper.

Some months after the first stunning assaults, under Delvil’s vengeful drive those parts of London along the Channel, the districts of Colchester and Ipswich, later the southern suburbs Hastings Ramsgate Dover, had all vanished from the face of the Earth where they had stood for so many centuries. Streets of ruined buildings were invaded by wilderness and forest. The concrete slabs were left open to the air; mosses and patches of greenery soon covered them. Concealed openings had been built into the slabs for ventilation and the delivery of raw materials. Shafts as in a mine were driven between different rock strata. They were building a coral reef. They proceeded from many places at once, and converged in the depths. They pushed through sand, alluvial and diluvial rubble; forced back deep groundwater, cut into layers of impermeable clay. Calmly implacably they spread abysmally deep into the Earth, these new cities with their people, the life of London Oxford Reading Colchester Hastings Ramsgate Luton Hertford Aldershot. They sank into the beds of old forgotten seas, between marl and chalk, rummaged among the silent remains of thin-shelled mussels from distant epochs, fragments of cephalopods from millennia before. They pushed walls of earth apart where once at high tide myriads of conches, generation on generation, had played, crystal clear beings with strong paddle-feet that moved up and down like wings through the foaming tide.

As level after level was dug into clay, as ever bigger caverns were excavated, and spoil – loose earth, blasted rock – was heaped up in ruined streets on the surface, everyone lost their sense of fear. They were not fleeing the monsters, but were on a grand new expedition. The senates called: “Away from the Earth,” and they dug merrily down; the miracle of human capability felt by the Greenland expeditionaries they now experienced for themselves.

Once more the western townzones of Europe exercised an enormous attractive pull. The actions of the westerners, initiated by fear and fired by vengeful feelings, fascinated nearby populations. People had stopped thinking of revenge on the Settlers; their great polar expedition had achieved nothing. Now their hatred turned on the Settlers: they were lured to this new venture. From north and west people were on the run before the migrating dying hordes of monsters, the lava-stream of creatures extruded by the Greenland volcano. At the same time, masses of people swarmed from south and east towards the coasts, filled with hate and hot joy at the ruin of the proud townzones, eager for air and a view of battle.

But at last they were deceived, were themselves caught up. The giant cities they approached were ruined as if by fire and earthquake. Terrible animal remains looming growing over them: monster carcasses roofbeams forests people, rotting suburbs, collapsing swamps of decay that trickled a green-black brew, ammonia-sulphur reek of desolation down empty streets. Black swarms of ravens, strong swollen creatures, squatted atop these dingy miles-long househigh swamps that subsided, merged like glaciers, emptied their ponds. Approaching you could hear from afar the noise of nesting birds. People coming from the south thought it was gas, smoke; when they came nearer it was sated birds whirling aloft. The monsters, lying and collapsing on the townzones of the North Sea coast, the Baltic, western France and Germany, had dragged an oozing greenbrown blanket of swamp over buildings gardens plazas. As they threshed grew disintegrated, they ground together buildings earth and living things; the Earth was being resurfaced, already winds were breathing on it, wild animals edging towards it. A wave of oriental people pushed across the German plain; they moved through southern Germany, came into contact with the strongly defended Marchland, drew people in from marauding bands. Among them were Asiatics, mixed-race people from the Russian steppe. They settled in the ruins of the old towns. Ventured into the shafts.

First the Meki-factories had gone underground, to join the great laboratories pushed into the Earth long decades

before. Facilities and factories followed. Finally came the mass of the population that had hidden a while in temporary concrete caves, or had fled east.

They were parted from the sky. In these warm extensive regions under the Earth's skin was no day or night. No birds sang, no grass plants trees could grow. They had no snow, no hail rain wind. Seasons never changed. Concrete slabs at the sides and overhead held back the encroaching Earth. In bays and vaults, endless miles of passages, everywhere dwellings factories plazas avenues. Shafts and caves were burned into the Earth. They made oxygen from machines, pumped it into passages and caverns that were like blisters in the Earth. Londoners diverted the water of the Thames into their grotto; let the flood surge down their avenues, built bridges over it. The river wound in great meanders through the concrete town, in the bed prepared for it. Finally they let it pile up; it burst through a concrete wall into an unsheathed shaft. It soaked into this mass of concrete and chalk unable to return; its foaming rumbling remnant circled around the town until it sank into sand and gravel.

Sunlight could not penetrate. But the powerful Londoners brought it in. There was the glowing ball of gas, astonishingly far away, the yellow-white sea of flame that fought with the ether's chill; the scornful people of the British Isles caught its light in mirrors, cast it into the depths over the laughing sauntering masses. It was thin, pale, bloodless as moonlight by day; died next to the white shining colour-spreading lights on the vaulted ceilings.

In deep rocky lairs near the sea, on the south coast under the Downs, wide halls were opened for purposes of pleasure. In these rocky caverns there grew up Brass Town, so called from all the decorated houses and theatres. Large parts of this town lay in darkness, were illuminated by giant spotlights. The place had its own police force to deal with the huge numbers of daily crimes. Masses came flooding in. The place was notorious, especially among Settlers, for leading people astray. But even the Senate, unconcerned as it was with the fate of individuals, felt obliged to allocate some weapons to the Brass Town police, for here chaos threatened.

The people of the western races who streamed into the subterranean cities were soon of an unprecedented volatility. They no longer lay idly about; the ferocity and tension in the senates seemed to flow into them too. The influx of eager foreigners added to their excitability. In the pleasure-houses and vaults where men and women mingled, violence bubbled up. The pleasures offered to the people were not enough; fighting was the next step. Men of the Senate had to intervene; they stabbed little electric sticks at hands foreheads ears in the mêlée, stunned the brawlers. Or made way for themselves with their silver ring: a sharp pressure on the balled fist caused a tongue-like point no bigger than a fingernail to shoot out of the finger-ring. The point was a hollow tube, a cannula. As they struggled they shoved it at some suitable spot on the victim's body, chest thigh throat, stunned the wretch with the drops that emptied the cannula. The point had to be extracted quickly or the victim would die at once; otherwise would wake up days later, but never regain full use of the limbs; the stabbed arm remained lame, the stabbed chest short of breath. The police were feared more than senators, who turned up now and then invisibly, never joined the action, just observed. People said these men and women of the Senate appeared in Brass Town only to arouse passions, place their police in danger and relish the brawls.

Brass Town hosted the great London Arena, where bullfights and lion fights were staged. Now and then unseen hands threw people into the arena over the heads of the crowd, to the spectators' delight. These were said to be criminals or plotters against the Senate; nothing certain was ever known, because no one left the Arena alive. Animal fights always took place in total darkness. Bulls were driven in darkness into the arena, where now and then a light darted. But the powerful beast was itself dazzling; it rushed dazzling, creating its own light, into the dark arena. Head neck legs were daubed with a special light mixture, a substance used by actors that attracted admiring remarks. It differed from the light mixture that produced the colourful illumination of walls and the whole underground town; it was easily transferred; stuck to fingers, clothing. The spectators sat in nervous silence. The animated lights ran glowing around the space, which phosphoresced under the hooves.

A memory of old tales awoke in the masses. They had heard of a Belgian, a former Settler named Ibis who allowed himself to be enticed to Britain's underground London.

He came with a young woman, Laponie, whom he had taken from another. Like him, she was delighted to come to the subterranean zone, had heard about the light mixture used by actors on the stage. Acquired some for herself. Unlike the actors from whom she wheedled it, she painted it not on face and hands, but on her nipples and private parts. Wanted to beguile her man. And when night came and he tried to approach her in the dark bedroom, she evaded him and was so pleased when she saw and heard and felt his delight. How it was not her he chased or saw, but only the glow of breasts and the glimmer of pudenda. She kept him somewhat at bay, so that his face would not pick up any of the light mixture. Then they lay together, and afterwards slept a gloriously pleasant happy sleep.

But Ibis now had the stuff on his own organ of pleasure. He was a handsome blond Fleming, who could not enjoy this new trick enough. Had to show it to other women, without letting on where he had acquired it. They visited dear Laponie, said nothing about Ibis, but of course let out the secret. Now Laponie was plagued by jealousy. She tried to clean the stuff from her labia, her breasts, but it stayed however desperately she scrubbed and wiped. And when Ibis approached her at night she tried to cover herself, hide away. But he could see her, see her private parts and breasts. She ran from the room, into the dark street. And people saw them running, man and woman, but not man and woman, one behind the other, now far apart, now closing in: only a woman's shimmering vulva and a man's rod and tackle, wobbling, running in circles. Laponie could see Ibis only when she turned, heedless of her shame; he saw only her and was heedless of his shame. She fled back home, wanted to scold him. But as they stood there in the dark she laughed; she couldn't be cross with him. He noticed only her laugh. They fell into each other's arms.

Yet something had lodged in tender Laponie's soul. She no longer liked her glimmering makeup, could not rest until she had obtained from the actor from whom she acquired it – she had traded ten kisses – some of the lotion that would remove it. Proudly she gave jaunty Ibis the come-on in the dark room; he turned in confusion, where was she. But she giggled, tapped his glowing privates with a little stick, made him yelp. And she ran around him like an imp, thwacked him. He tried to catch her, squeeze her to him, tonight and many following nights. But she kept her nerve, made him feel her jealousy with every stroke. Until the actor, to whom she went gladly and told her worries, gave her good advice and in the course of the conversation painted her again with the light.

Only when she got home did she notice how the room made her sad; spent the whole day thinking of what she had done. Too late to run back and beg the naughty actor for the green salty lotion; Ibis was already home. So she flung herself on the bed, let shine whatever would shine. Ibis banged around outside, opened the door. She lay stiff, held her breath; now he'd see it. And he saw. Stood in the doorway, clapped his hands. "There you are, Laponie. At last I see you again."

"I'm not here for you."

"For who then, sweet Laponie? Why this time only your little clamshell, not the nipples?"

"It's not for you. I have – had my revenge."

"Revenge! Laponie, you're glowing. When you thwack me, it's not nice." And at once he seized the struggling figure. For a moment she flung herself sulkily on her side because he refused to be angry with her, but soon they came together in passion.

And she was unable to stay serious when she saw him glowing in the dark. Yes, she remarked, they're growing happier and happier every day. They hid from each other. Ibis said to Laponie: "We're too much in love. We should part for a while."

They managed it only a couple of days. They did not realise that the light mixture was stimulating them to ever more merriment. A heavenly joy filled them both. And the same with the women whom Ibis had touched, who had not washed with the green lotion. Five months later he was no longer alive and she was no longer alive. And all the many people who had failed to distance themselves from the light mixture – girls actors drug-takers – were all gone. The shimmer glimmer glow of the painted organs faded, the excitement remained.

And as people grew sallow and uncertain, they became boisterous, played tricks all day long. They succumbed to dance mania and erotic frenzy. And when these people – everyone knew it – began to dance and could not abide a chair beneath them, the end was near. Quite literally they danced themselves into the grave, a grave that often in their hilarity they dug and kitted out themselves.

At that time the dead were ejected from the subterranean town onto the surface among the piles of debris. But the dancers aroused such peculiar emotions that a special place was set aside for them below ground; this happened almost as a game. They seemed by their dancing to be using up the last traces of light mixture. After an hour's frenzy, alone or coupled – that is how Ibis and Laponie ended up – they threw themselves in with screams of joy, and at once lay quite still, pale, almost without flesh. And the people standing around were astonished at the nullity in which this wild frolic ended. In a few cases the glow did not fade entirely. Above those graves a gentle glimmer could be seen in the pitch darkness. This happened especially with those who died very early. A scent of lilac always accompanied the glimmer; even the dead still spread merriment around them.

At the circus, people in the completely darkened arena saw bulls charging, men and women fighting them. Blood spurted from the beast's neck, its flanks. It was a firework, a blazing beam of light. You saw the light mixture penetrate the body, mingle intimately with the blood. Those fighting tried to escape the beam, stay in the dark. If the bull sprayed them or slobbered on them, they were finished and could only be helped by others. No use digging in the sand: they only glowed brighter than ever. Were themselves dazzled, stumbled around in a flood of sunshine. They became objects of mirth, transformed from fighters to clowns. And it was entirely up to the other gladiators how the game would play out. Whatever happened, any who were spattered were finished. And so they played out their game in the dark with the bull and the glowing man, glowing woman. They used their skill to prolong the game with all sorts of funny and exciting variations, ending it on a whim with the humans run down or (the circus roaring laughter) the bull speared just before it reached its goal. And now came the teasing of the radiant surviving glowworms; they were confused, teetered between grief and the merriment already bubbling up.

Not a performance went by without a parade of jolly glowworms who had survived previous fights. Later, when all fear had been laid aside, they were subjected to crazy and inhuman treatment; the glowworms let it happen. There came a time in London's Brass Town when the way to the circus and the circus itself were lit not by giant spotlights: glowing men and women, living lamps, were prodded to twitch and dance; the whole circus was lit up by them as if by candles.

Among the masses streaming into the strata of clay-chalk-marl under the British Isles, the memory of the Greenland expedition had not faded. But there was in them no sense of a defeat. When the monsters came they were terrified. Then icy Delvil whirled among them; they were driven underground, freed of every sense of weakness as tower-people were constructed before their eyes, the fleet of tower-people extended along the Channel from the South Coast up to the north. Never had the Settlers been so despised. Delvil spoke truly to Ten Keir: the cause of Marduk and the Settlers had been dealt with, brutally.

What began with London continued in Brussels Hamburg. City after city took its facilities underground; people followed. Small colonies stayed on the surface. Engineers were driven by boundless arrogance; in boundless arrogance

people dived into the depths. To drive new tunnels and shafts, more workers were needed than on the surface. Machines for oxygen production and air purification, for lighting the ever-growing subterranean districts, required a huge workforce. But they were rewarded with many pleasures. Facilities for physicists technologists biologists proliferated in discreet locations nearest the surface, rapidly became as extensive in area as a small townzone. Prouder and more irascible than ever, these men and women of science. They had laid aside all shame. The masses knew, but acquiesced in everything these lordly beings offered them.

In London, where the glowworms first appeared, men and women of various races began to offer themselves to the lordly beings as slaves, bondmen and women. The senates needed people for the Meki-factories and research facilities, always snatching them invisibly from settlements and towns. But now people gave up any claim to dispose of their own persons. They were in the same driven state of ecstatic arousal as most of those in the subterranean strata. All they wanted was a profounder ecstasy; had no idea what to do with themselves. At the same time listless meek beings turned up at the doors of senators. They used the same words as the others, but you could see: they had drifted here, had taken part in many things, declined to take further part, were hastening to the slaughterhouse. These strange people seemed helpless, especially white people from the Continent. The men in the facilities heard them out, had them chained at the ankles and led away. They were vicious, you could see; they offered themselves to slavery only out of despair and disgust at their impotence.

Like the epidemic of suicides after the Urals War, now came a craze for serfdom. In plazas of the subterranean townzones, little clusters of people gathered every day at certain spots which soon became known. The men and women offering themselves for sale even roped these places off. They decided themselves who should take them. Some specified a particular present that should be given them, regardless of the purchaser. The Senate took away a crowd of these every week to build new tower-people, and to serve as feed for those already in place. Many were used in experiments and ongoing work in the technology town. Lazy people with a work obligation sent many to the machines as substitutes.

TIME OF TRUE HUMANITY

THE MASSES who poured like foaming water into the abyss of the mega-cities had no idea what was planned for them by the strong men and women whose work this all was, from whose hand they lived. Delvil was immersed in his sinister monstrous vengeful thoughts, his ideas for combatting the violence unleashed by the primeval creatures; he took little part in meetings of the Senate. Ten Keir, the burly Belgian, had retreated to the background, shaken by his conversations with Delvil. The brave sane man was repelled by Delvil's anger. He had only reluctantly witnessed a start on the construction of a giant human, and then turned away. He never flew again to London. When people mentioned the success of the tower-giants, bile rose into his throat; he would hear no more. It seemed he preferred the onslaught of the monsters to this defensive measure.

Ten Keir braced himself, as in Brussels too the urge grew to be buried in the Earth. But he could not stop it. Succeeded only in preventing the ecstatic masses who poured back out of the subterranean shafts from destroying buildings on the surface. He, together with a small number of people, stayed on the surface in an obscure state of grief. He said it was to keep an eye on the Settlers.

In London's technology and research town, provocatively called the Greenlandeum, suspended over the heads of the teeming masses in strata of clay and marl, the most powerful brains among the ruling class came together and gathered about them every kind of raw material. Here in the district of Carthagon, working on plant energy, sat Atkinson, a cold gloomy man, said to be a eunuch by his own volition, a misogynist. In Oceana, working with water, the Spanish Berber Escoyez, the water-creature who at the start of the Greenland campaign had advocated diverting the Gulf Stream and creating new sources of salinity under the sea. The heat of flames was studied by Nadeya, a shemale from Atkinson's stable. In the district of Tel el-Habs, the Hill of the Prison, sat several senatorial personages who could only with difficulty be termed human. These were men and women who had taken part in the construction of the tower-humans and, like animals who had once licked blood, could not free their thoughts from what they had seen and experimented with. They returned reluctantly from the hulks and Scottish peaks to the sober paltry realm of humans – these two-legged whinging naked obsolete creatures.

Atkinson became a eunuch out of misogyny, misanthropy too. The men and women of Tel el-Habs, having seen the tower-people, no longer wanted to be embodied in human organs. Experiments on slaves in their prison they tried as well on themselves. Tribord, returning from the summit of Glas Maol, gave up his old name, called himself Mentusi. He stopped eating, spread animals and plants over himself. Mentusi said to the shemale Kuraggara, who had once been Mrs Macfarlane: "Meki and his generation did well to abandon fields and forests to the wild. What we can make of ourselves we shall make. They built great factories, facilities. We've dragged these facilities around with us for centuries. They require space and supervision. How proud we are of these facilities. Now they're superfluous. We must reset the point of

attack. I am all for ploughed fields and herds of cattle again. A dog can eat for me, as much as it wants, as long as it remains my dog. Didn't you see the stones and oaks and herds of cattle thrown onto the towers. They had to eat for the towers. I'll be a dog myself, if I stuff myself much longer with what the factories brew up."

Polyps hung on the man of Tel el-Habs. His abdomen was bored through. He sent his colleagues out into abandoned forests; they brought back foxes otters African zebras, turtles. The age-old difficulty of marrying two species was overcome: Mentusi had worked it out while observing the construction of the towers. The radiant webs mixed all species together. Just as he had scorned Meki, he scorned Marduk who had made trees grow: "Kuraggara, they were yogis and fakirs. Jokers! Let them admit it. Until the Greenland expedition we were nothing. The man who plucked fire and rays from volcanoes is my man."

Kuraggara held her sides laughing: "I'll try to have a turtle baby."

"Why not. Who can stop you."

They did terrible things there on Tel el-Habs, the Hill of the Prison.

These Giants, lords of the western townzones, saw primal monsters wash over them and were not shattered. The magic webs of Greenland did not beguile them as they had those sailors who abandoned their vessels under the rosy light, stepped into boats, rocked naked – bliss upon bliss – on the water. The lords and ladies of the mega-zones sat cold and hateful behind their power. Like robbers concealed in a royal park, watching through a fence as elegant beauties stroll in the meadow, loose hair under bright shawls, buxom playgirls – they make their calculations, await their chance and pounce to seize and carry them off – just so did the untameable people of Tel el-Habs spy on the secret of the volcano, seize it and impose themselves on it.

The people of Tel el-Habs, the Hill of the Prison, worked with people from Basalt Town, which looked like a collapsed cone. Here they busied themselves with the entity called "rock". They took red rubies, violet apatite, blocks of glassy gypsum, infused them with the rays of Kylin that had burst Iceland's volcanoes asunder. They directed ruby-inducing ruby-forming energies not onto ruby, but onto its relation corundum. Normally it stayed inert under the impact of this energy, which for it was no energy at all; each thing was set in motion by its own particular stimulus. But the basalt people had control of volcanic heat itself. They directed the heavy artillery of this energy onto some substance. Like cake dough when yeast is added, the mineral mass began to swell. The basalt people placed glass tubes around the scraps of web; used gases to release and dampen the primordial energies. Now little by little over long long hours the ruby began to stir, like a linen sheet bleaching under the sun. And always the Kylin rays burned into it, with no effect on the mass, which merely fermented.

There existed a point, gradually ascertained by the basalt people after strenuous investigations with the help of attenuators dampers retardants: the point of indifference and change. This was the moment that meant everything in the life of the rock-being. It was the moment when its strongest and most resistant material ties burst apart, the rock itself, although not glowing, was about to turn to dust, ready to be devoured and annexed by any nearby solid substance. The Kylin rays burned into the rock; the change was coming. The nearby substance must be held down. As a small crystal seed thrown into a supersaturated solution causes the whole mass to solidify, so the softened body stiffened, allowed itself to be directed to the entity designated by the Kylin rays. It was painstaking work. They learned to turn a granite block, formed of hard sprinkles of quartz, dark hornblende, mica, reddish feldspar, into a single homogenous block of white quartz.

While the people of Basalt Town were engaged on the transformation of primal substances – at every turn they saw themselves transformed – the lords of the Hill of the Prison took to themselves all they needed. Animals formerly never found together, unless for example one was eating the other, were flung together; everything must be reduced to the mother substance, broken down to the elemental. Sequestered in their subterranean fortress they tried in angry fury to transform themselves into hares mice panthers beetles. For this they took endless people from the underworld and surface world, made use of the slave market, played havoc with humanity.

Mentusi and Kuraggara lived in a fever of expectation. How they laughed. Mentusi boasted: "When there were religions, a hundred or a thousand sensible people never believed in the Devil Satan Heaven God angels everlasting life. What did these sensible people do? For their whole life they did not believe. Not believing: that was their business. And there were some who gave their lives to fight against the existence of Satan Heaven or God. Drip, drip. Whoever has a crazy idea should be allowed his fun. I don't care about primeval monsters, stupid lizards. They can't reach us down here. What do you say, Kuraggara? All they can do is die, and there's room enough for that up there. But – now! What do you say?"

"I too have no time for the reptiles."

"We should build them an aquarium, so they don't die too soon and we can feed them nicely. They should like it better here with us than in Greenland. I'll go to Greenland and see what happened there. Maybe I'll take a dragon a lizard with wings and snout to be my steed and make it carry me there. Hallelujah, sweet land. Off to Jerusalem!"

"Aren't you being just as childish as those who fought against Heaven or Satan? Mentusi, why should I care about Greenland? Maybe I'll go there. Maybe Iceland would be better, the volcanoes. But if I go, I'll manage without any ship or dragon or plane. Be a bird, if I want. Be steam, if I want. Yes, I want this too, Mentusi. And be a fish! And fire. Not like that wretched tower-human I visited recently in Scotland. I flew up to its eyes, close to and then farther away until it recognised me. It did recognise me. It was an old friend. But what's that to me – it was grieving! Grieving a dark dreadful grief. As it blinked its eyes I had a feeling I should leave at once, it must forget me, I'm just a bad dream. It was a dull

sleeping man who can't wake up. If I'd hovered around any longer it would have grabbed me like a Greenland creature and gobbled me down. Like a stupid child: grab fumble, into the mouth. But to be a fox from top to toe, live like a fox as long as you want, feel all foxy. Yes, Mentusi."

"We've been too long in our skin. We'll end up like those bleating sheep in London who give themselves to our factories and experiments. They still have human skin. They don't care what happens. Do you know," he roared laughter, "do you know what I shall do with them."

"I can guess."

"Yes, I'll turn them into sheep. We'll herd them into a meadow, chuck chuck chuck. We'll hide behind a tree chuck chuck. They come along, we put them in a sack, ask them: 'Do you really want to eat mutton?' 'Yes,' they say, 'mutton's lovely.' 'Fine,' I say, and tie up the sack. Chuck chuck chuck. Light here, some steam there. 'Are you all right?' 'Sure.' 'Are you nervous?' 'A little.' 'Don't be afraid, my little chickens. I'll soon give you mutton to eat. The sheep are just coming out of their stall.' I nearly said: the sack. More light here, two steamers. Patience, patience. 'And how are you now, my little chickens?' 'Baa baa.' 'What is that noise! You must already be eating mutton.' 'Baa baa.' Don't laugh, Kuraggara. Isn't that the way to do it?"

"That's the way, Mentusi! Baa baa!"

"My little chickens. Soon I'll open the stall. There'll be such a surprise. You'll have mutton soon enough. But what's this scrabbling in the sack? 'Baa baa.' What's this, I've made a mistake, Kuraggara. Sheep already in the sack! How is that possible!"

"I can't laugh any more, I'll choke if you don't stop, Mentusi."

"There! No, Kuraggara. Sheep! Bodies and legs and tails, large as life! Woolly sheep. Four of them, that's how many people I put in there. And where are my people – gone. The sheep must have eaten them. I must have put sheep in by mistake, they've eaten the people. I was distracted. Man-eating sheep. What should I do now."

"Stop joking, Mentusi. If only we were that far on."

How the Giants despised the people of their townzones. They let machines factories devices hum away only so they could feel powerful. They needed the masses as something on which to vent their spleen. How measured were the words uttered on Tel el-Habs, the thought once spoken by Ten Keir in London – the little Belgian's square ruddy face expressionless; he suppressed his horror at what he was witnessing in the research towns; his retinue did not betray how he vomited and wept at the sight of a dumb tower-human on a raft as they crossed the Channel. The cruel corrupt arrogant beings, men and shemales of the research towns, had spoken to him without reservation; said: the time of true humanity is coming at last; at least, we sense it.

Ten Keir had watched with horror the play of snake-like polyp arms on their bodies; so this is the beginning of true humanity. Of the human creatures underfoot, zone people and Settlers, they said nothing, unless with a lewd look and laughter. He saw what these Giants were capable of. One day they'd clump together all this mass of people, just as the dragon-hordes had done. He said: People must be on their guard, lest anyone misuse his powers to harm others. It's good to keep an eye on the masses: some foam and rage, while others have no idea what to do. Something must be done. An attempt must be made, as proposed by the old Wind and Water Theory: simplify the confused despondent creatures to the level of animals and plants. Maybe reduce their numbers at the same time. We must try to achieve an enduring form of humanity. Uncomplicated forms of life that survive procreate die, pass on their external mode of life unchanged for centuries millennia. The burden of individuality, the terrible condition of possessing an individual soul, must be lifted from them.

The Giants of Tel el-Habs had laughed at him: Let's see where that will lead! Maybe they'd do something of the sort as a sideline; it wasn't a very enticing task. Ten Keir, weighed down by suffocating grief and trepidation, had tried to gain access to Delvil. No one could come near him. Ghastly rumours circulated about what he was up to. For days on end, Ten Keir and his retinue walked the tunnels and streets of gleaming buried London. He had a room readied in a house where he could stop for a few hours. He sat in the dark, wept. And could not leave London. He pressed on again with his companions. They warned him not to exhaust himself, could see his misery. But he could not pull free of the zone. He tried three times to reach Delvil. He begged at Kuraggara's feet: find a way in to Delvil, he's a friend. She marvelled at the man's passion, could do nothing. Twice Ten Keir went up to the surface, twice descended again into the shafts. To himself he said: "I have to weep. I have to weep. Weep much more than this. I must steep myself, like a pigeon about to be plucked. I must see everything. I deserve it."

But when he had gone once more through the slave market the circus the working town, research zone, he came to the western edge where soil broke through into the tunnel, and picked up a handful of loose gravel. Dropped it in his pocket. As he went back up, eyes tight shut, he squeezed the gravel, whispered: "I shall remember."

On the surface his companions looked at him, thought he would order their return home. But they must take him to the coast. He sent his plane back. He crossed the Channel in a small boat to the Flanders coast. The gravel he took from the western edge of London was black and grey. During the crossing he kept looking at it in his open hand, tears were in his eyes. Closed his fist when anyone seemed to be looking, stuffed his hand back in his pocket.

KYLIN'S CALL

THE LAST OF the Greenland and Iceland expeditionaries still lurked in Shetland and the Faroes. Even during the expedition the senates had feared the sailors would turn on them. But they never came, never stormed the zones. It was known that they had fled from the primeval monsters back to their gathering grounds. Amid the catastrophe of the monsters' incursion, the frenzy of subterranean town-building, they were totally forgotten. When people thought of them later, they hoped they would appear and do battle. They never did.

It was a dumb suffering community that hid away on the rocky ground of these sea-howling islands, living off what was left of of ship's stores, in solitude. Scouts now and then sneaked across to the Scottish hills. The primeval creatures had fallen on the western townzones as a soul-freezing horror. When the hideous creatures swooped on expeditionaries in the zone of pink light, when vessels people girders steel became transformed and their bliss evaporated all at once, the feeling clamoured through all the horror: "It's good! At last, at last!" Speeding over the water, entering the zone of daylight, half the great fleet had succumbed to the monsters. The survivors fleeing pell-mell across the sea had felt: "Now it's finished. Now we are redeemed." Were stranded on the stony islands, thought little, breathed towards the Earth.

The scouts returned: Scotland is sealed off to the south. Gloomy thought: "Against the Greenland creatures. And us. They're blockading themselves against us." Bitter comfort. The expeditionaries crept deeper into the crevices of the islands. No one went to the ships. They spent an icy winter on the islands wanting only to sleep, kept mostly away from one another. Often a rushing chattering of monsters flew over the islands. The huddled cowering people shivered as if caught in a storm, hid their faces, lay brooding. It was all so unreal. They looked on one another in their caves tents old cottages: so others are still here. They themselves were there, moving eating drinking. They thought and felt. Felt endlessly, better not to look. Felt in vain, unable to reach themselves. What were they like? Like when a hurricane has caught you and blown you into a corner of a cave. You hang on in there, a speck of dust in a spider's web, can't leave. They went around, sobbed, sought for a voice. Often a trepidation came over them, afflicting tautening the skin, pressing on chest and throat: oh what's happening with us. They sighed, let spittle drool.

One disappeared, then another. Into the water, to Scotland. On Mainland the junior officer Goodluck burned the nearest ships. Emaciated like the others he slunk about the cliffs, stuck his ginger head into caves, called, wanted people. Growled: "Who's there? Anyone there? Ha! It's Goodluck."

"What does Goodluck want?"

"Nothing. To look at you. Do you know what I've done?"

"You voice sounds rough."

"The smoke. I set fire to the ships."

"Who cares."

"All gone. It was the right thing. Oh, what am I doing." He wandered the caves, sat by the sea. One day he went back to the cottages, his hoarse voice called to everyone he came across, urgently: "Quick. Come down to the water." He sat on the shore, took two big smooth stones between his knees, started to rub. He snarled at the people who came along: "Sit. Pick up stones. Do what I'm doing. Grind." Some did so. He snarled: "Grind, grind. Till it's all dust." Then he let the stones fall, chivvied them: "What shall we do now. Throw pebbles. Over the water." And began to throw. The others uttered a curse, withdrew glumly. He tugged at one, at another: "Don't leave me alone. Don't leave me. What should I do."

"Throw your stones." They ran off. "Stupid beast." Left him snarling gulping.

What started with Goodluck continued with others. Until bedraggled Kylin turned up on Mainland in a boat in St Magnus Bay, and brought together on a stony plain everyone amenable to his call. He went from one to the other, looked at the men and women, held hands. "Supplies are almost gone. That crazy Goodluck burned the best stocked ships. No matter. Now we must make decisions."

A tormented voice mocked: you want to lead us again, to Greenland maybe?

"No. I will not speak the name of that land. Certainly not how pious people of earlier times spoke the name of a god they believed in. Nor do I want to lead you. Yes, I'm guilty. Not of the Tourmaline webs and the last calamity. But the one before. I did that. I burst open the volcanoes." He stood whispering beside a rock. "Do what you want with me."

They stood about. Kylin sat, covered his face, sobbed. No one touched him.

"What will happen now. I thought it all over so carefully, once I knew everything. You'll do nothing to me. Although in many a moment I'd prefer someone to do something. But I'm past that now. That's why I've come."

Some of them looked up.

"Perhaps we'll be here another month, two months on these islands. But I want to leave. Dear friends, I am on my way and just wanted to let you know. Goodluck is crazy. Some of you will go crazy if you don't act decisively and if nothing happens. I'm going away. This I know."

"Why, Kylin. Where to."

"I can't explain what's happened. If I stay much longer, there'll be no need for dragons to come and eat me. I don't want that. Shall I tell you? The townzones are no longer my enemy."

They pressed closer about him.

“The zones had no need to throw up defences against us. For sure I’ll do nothing against them.”

“Nor will we.”

“Friends, you know what I’ll do? I, Kylin? I’ll be on my way. Why stay here, outside the zones, at their door? I shall go into the world. The Earth is big.”

Now many of them whimpered mocked laughed. But Kylin stayed on the plain by St Magnus Bay. Unease drained from them. Hunger stalked them. The old expeditionaries no longer looked up when swarms of monsters rushed overhead. They congregated on the last freighters. Climbed wearily aboard, sighing. Sailed in little groups down into the calm Irish Sea.

The Orkney and Shetland Isles, so long occupied by human groups, girdled by the western fleets, were emptied, given back to wave and storm. As silently as they had quit Iceland, the expeditionaries released Shetland and Orkney. Here oil clouds had been created, Holyhead and Bou Jeloud, from here uncountable ships had sailed laden with the devices and mind-power of the western townzones. Thousands of human deaths ensued, Iceland torn apart. The icy continent with its glaciers emerged, overwhelmed by terrors. To all of those who voyaged, this had happened. They sailed away, but wanted to remember. Now hurl this last thing from them, the old anchoring places, leave the ships behind. And then to the Continent. Kylin, greatly aged, eyes glowing, had said to them: Live again. What would happen on the Continent. But they wanted to go. The townzones were still there.

BY THE CAMPFIRE

THE SEA changed during the voyage. North Channel, Irish Sea. Waves crashed played lapped. Distant stars shining. The water mirrored the ship-bodies, silently mirrored the hulls. Threads of algae trailed soundlessly. Mild breezes played, buffeted, died away. They travelled slowly. Near the Scilly Isles they turned east. A dark line appeared over the white glittering arc of sea. There to the southeast, where sea melted into the shimmering white twilight of sky, was a broken line. The fragmented strokes showed blacker, chunkier. On the ships they shut their eyes, lay down by spars and rails. The Continent. The leaders increased speed. The sea hissed gently evenly beneath them. Soon they saw chalk cliffs, white jags, surf below. The ships exchanged signals. Slowed, heaved to on the open sea. Every ship stopped in sight of the continental coast. A silent hour passed. Wind snapping singing moaning.

The Continent began with raw cliffs of chalk, then fell smoothly away beyond. Once a mountain chain stretched from Cornwall and Ireland across to the Continent. The mountains sank, sea flooded over them; now the sea flowed around islands. To the south and east lay French landscapes embraced by Atlantic waters, stretching down to the glittering southern sea. Centuries and millennia of hollows basins plateaux hills had formed this land. Ancient seas in the north flowed away. Volcanoes extinct: their ejecta lay on the high plains. Great rivers opened the breast of the land, swelled majestically seaward. There lay the land with its mountains fields river-plains vineyards, not pausing until it could greet the sea. It brought forth meadows moors spates, mountain tarns. Its ground engendered green deciduous forests, roots rising in black and silver trunks to unfold leaf-masses to the air-drenched sky. They absorbed light, wedded themselves to light. Plants looked about, green red yellow. Grasses stood side by side in dense clumps, played, let the wind hum against their edges. Ants ran on the forest floor, shelled beetles shimmering brown, they felt around blades stalks, turned them over, searching dragging. Flies floated, droned thinly through the buoyant air. Big slow beasts snuffled at the soil of fields and meadows. Heavy-bellied cows chewed grass; they nipped and grubbed with muscular lips, gathered it on the wet rough tongue. Horses with lowered heads and big black eyes at the ploughs of Settlers; long tail lashing the hindquarters.

People walked the Earth, scratched and petted their livestock. Unlike cows and sheep these bodies had no fur; they had no scales, received the light of the distant sun on bare smooth skin. For the gases of the air they had delicate transparent openings at mouth and nose. The vault of the chest, framed by a bony arc of ribs, provided space for air. The chest rose and fell like a spinning wheel, pulled air in, let it out. People sucked tirelessly at air, soaked themselves in invisible powers. They let the juices of many plants and animals flow through their viscera, helped themselves to the powers that had settled in the Earth and let them burn inside them. Animals had climbed from water; humans could not escape water and it would not escape from them; it flowed through their substance and their skin. People flew light and trembling over meadows plains plateaux, drifted tirelessly towards those things that gave them life and prolonged their lives. They had knees that could bend with the body the neck, go down to streams, hunt game for the meat it gave. From calcium in the ground they developed hard bones that enabled them to push and tug, joints so they could curl up, hide away and protect their sweet life. They smacked and sucked at many things that tasted nice, bitter sour spicy. How good to have teeth to bite and crack. What they chewed went down the throat to the stomach, did the body good.

And always the eye was drawn to novelties, everything around them moving, birds treetops wind sand. The sun made colours glow, cast sharp shadows. People had eyes, the day’s delight, this blessed marriage with light. The skin was sensitive; limbs that let themselves be moved carried the whole body: where to. To coolness, warmth, a cow for the

milking, and to things human, skin, a shoulder, a soft lap. Man and woman joined. That's what feet and knees were for, to go, draw near to one another. Exchange glances, touch hands, mouth against mouth, and not only mouths. They had a body, oh the burrowing. What they felt and folded to them: that people are not water, are not to be melted into it. That people endure, this comforting soothing: this staring and absorption in the fire's flames. That this one has breasts, heavy tresses, soft skin, the other hardness, roughness. Swelling bushy parts commingling: the exuberance of the sweetness they engender. Wings that transport you to another land. And all this hung above the ground, person with person, seed streamed, they lay in shadow, in darkness, embraced in motherly light.

On cultivated land, in mountains, along river plains, in forests: people. To this country between the cold Atlantic waters and the southern sea came the Greenland expeditionaries. They detoured around the great zones. They saw Brussels – no longer Brussels but a waste of rubble where Ten Keir was enthroned, watching over it. He was a bloodhound: the expeditionaries scattered to elude him. They headed north, meant to contact Marduk's realm, of which now nothing was known. Then near Amiens they encountered some of old Ten Keir's men, a little tribe making its way to the rubble heap of Valenciennes. These mingled with the expeditionaries, tried to sound them out. They kept mum. When they were among the ruins Ten Keir himself appeared. He said his name, looked attentively at the ragged men and women. Had they come by ship to Belgium, clad in leather as they were. A whole day with them left him uneasy. And suddenly he came upon Kylin, a man known to every senator in these regions. Kylin was sitting in a cart, handing out bread that Settlers had given him. He glanced without interest at the man in front of him. Now Ten Keir, deeply shocked, saw who these people were: Greenland expeditionaries, broken through the barricade. But the barricade had been left to decay. He called Kylin by name. Glaring into Ten Keir's eyes he dropped a bread roll. Ten Keir bowed: "You're Kylin."

"Ten Keir?" - "Yes." Kylin with his long greyblack beard retrieved the roll. "Don't be afraid. If you are afraid."

"Not afraid. Astonished, Kylin. You are Kylin."

"Does my beard puzzle you? Your townzone hasn't grown any younger."

"Brussels is not the townzone. You can't see it. It's gone underground."

"I know. I heard."

"Why do you keep looking around, Kylin? Are you afraid of me?"

"The land is very pretty. We'll move on. I wish you the best of luck."

"Where to, Kylin."

"I don't know. To the north. The east. Farewell, Ten Keir."

Uneasy Kylin moved on at once. Ten Keir kept an eye on them; his agents were along the road, mingling. The Belgian concealed this encounter from the senate of his zone; but it perturbed him. What are the expeditionaries up to, what will they do. Felt anxious, could not put them from his mind. Were they Settlers? He was helpless. A few weeks later his agents could tell him nothing more of the band: it had dissipated. Probably out of hunger, Ten Keir consoled himself, doubtfully. The Giants across the Channel strutted and busied themselves; he drifted pale-faced. Sat over the Brussels townzone. Gravel from the dreadful London of Kuraggara and Mentusi crunched in his pocket. He was harried, had no idea where to go.

The expeditionaries turned south into an ever more blooming landscape. They wandered in small groups, kept in contact. When the black hills of Argonne loomed and they began to go hungry in that desolate waste, Kylin waited a week until all the bands had turned up. In the valley of the Aire some three thousand people assembled, with carts barrows mules horses ox-teams. The firs of the forest had sprouted bright green needles. In a grove of young conifers, Kylin spoke with a small group of leaders.

"We must separate. We really must separate now. There's no food if we stay together. We can be attacked all at once. Ten Keir of Brussels is on our tail."

He went among the twenty men and women. Young Idatto, a gaunt man who had conquered the zone-dwellers' strange obsession with fat, held his arm: "What's to become of us?"

"You'll never be sick again, Idatto."

"I know. So I won't ever be sick again."

"We must separate."

"But I want to stay with you. I'll fall sick again, sicker than before."

"You think so, Idatto?"

"We don't want to separate, Kylin."

"We'll stay together in small groups. That's what I want as well. But we can't keep moving as we have been. You know how many are going hungry."

"I can go hungry and everyone would rather go hungry than lose each other. Ask Bersihand and Magin, anybody. All would rather go hungry than separate."

Kylin dropped his hand, stood silent, looked down, his lips moved: "You can all speak." And one after the other, the men and women all repeated what sick Idatto had said. They pressed around Kylin, who kept stepping away.

When Kylin opened his gleaming eyes they had no idea as they started back in shock why he began to threaten and scream: "So do what you want. Go hungry, let yourselves be attacked, stay together. I won't stop you. I've no power to stop you. You have no power to stop me. I'm leaving."

Idatto implored: "But why?"

"Yes, ask. Just asking is a bad sign. You're better now, Idatto: what's your good health for? I'm astonished what you

all do with your good health. No, horrified. I have to say: I am ashamed of you." Kylin sank to the ground as if weary, stretched, head turned aside, pushed his hands into soft soil. Some seemed to understand this movement. Stocky curly-haired Damatile took hesitant Idatto by the arm, looked into his face: "Quiet now, little Idatto."

And as they stood in silence, Kylin climbed to his feet. Damatile took his hand. She wanted to speak. But Kylin raised both hands, gazed at her and the others. Everyone knew: he's thinking of Greenland volcanoes glaciers monsters. The thought pulsed through them. Kylin chewed his thin lips. "We must part, Damatile, my friends. So that we are not destroyed." Now they understood. Young gaunt Idatto wept at the Earth. Kylin listened quietly for a while. The only sound was the young man's weeping.

"What else is there to say, my friends. Why upset yourselves. Tell the others out there. Explain clearly. But they will surely understand why we must stay alive."

They passed the rest of that day in the valley of the Aire. When a big campfire burned in Kylin's group near the little grove of firs, and the leaders gathered around Kylin, all the groups knew: it's over. Their sorrow and pain had not abated. At first the leaders sat by the huge roaring fire, leaned stiffly back on mossy ground in the living ruddy glow. Then Kylin stood, bowed towards the fire, and staring ahead threw jacket and belt into it. Kneeling, forehead to the ground, he paused a while. Stood up as the others watched in silence, passed his hands over the nearest fir tree, bowed to it. When he took his place again by the fire, his lips opened as he stared into the blaze: "I have to tell you –," the voice toneless, hands slack at his knees; "No, I have nothing to tell you. You can see it all for yourselves. This, this is fire." Head bowed to his chest: "I repent," he whispered, "I repent."

Uneasy shuffling in the circle. Kylin whispered: "Don't hide from yourselves. I – am strong. Won't let myself be broken. I look ahead. Into the future. I look it in the face. There. I stand. I confront it. I look into its eyes, through its eyes. Deeper, into its head. Deeper, into its throat. I see. I dare. I survive. I am on my knees. But I don't fall over. My eyes are steady. And if any should take up clubs, they'll never drive me from it."

A bulky dark-skinned man stood up, slouched heavily over to Kylin, knelt behind him, stared bitterly past his shoulder. He clenched his teeth, rubbed his forehead in the dirt. A woman's quiet whimpering; then she screamed, a sinewy thing with a warm sad face, fuzzy upper lip. She stretched out her arms: "Away with it all. Greenland, volcanoes. Monsters. Away. Away with it." Jumped up, ran off. Men drew back from the flames, angry, close to rage. They saw the fire, Iceland, of course they knew it already. How they forced themselves: they choked, vomited, bent their heads, eyes popped, they choked, let themselves fall back.

Kylin sat quite still. His eyes bored into the fire with a desolate rage, were given to the fire: "Survive. Nobody touch me. Either I burn myself out, or I endure."

Damatile, strong snubnosed woman, shouted across the flames at Kylin: "Our despoiler. You! We came through it all, Tourmaline webs, dragons. The worst comes last: Kylin. The worst is called Kylin. He tore open the volcanoes and now it's our turn. He won't let us come to terms with it. Won't let us recover. Kylin, monster, dragon."

He groaned: "Ever onward. For myself. This is Greenland. This – is – Greenland."

Amid the retching grumbling groaning of the men and women, young Idatto crept to the fire. His gaze was avid: "Lured away. Back again. I'm coming. You won't get away from me. Here am I, Idatto. I am Idatto. You are fire. You are Greenland. I don't grind my teeth. I am at your side. Just come, burn, rage, be my fire, swallow it down. Oh sweet heat. Down my throat. Sweet hot swirling air. Waft into me. I shall survive."

Kylin: "You must survive, Idatto. It's Greenland. It's fire. You must not evade it."

The black man on the ground groaned: "Kylin, you. I shall survive. How you torment us. Once we were well."

"I've made no one well, no one sick. Idatto, support me, I'll support you, be my friend. Say it with me: This is fire, this is fire."

"What should I say."

"This is fire. So it won't go out, Idatto."

"Yes, I want to." They held each other. The ruddy fire threw out heat. Men and women covered their ears. The two men breathed: "Fire. This is Greenland. Fire. Greenland." And the others straightened, bowed their heads, stammered: "Yes, yes." For Kylin and Idatto would not succumb. The people were weak from choking and retching. "Here's my shawl, my belt," someone muttered, threw the belt into the fire. The fire ate it, lifted it crackling in the flames, spat smoke. "It must happen. There is no salvation." And some pushed close to Kylin and Idatto as they clung together; encouraged: "It's good. You are good. We thank you. Take me along. Kylin, you never let us sink into sleep."

"Fire. Greenland. Fire. Greenland."

"I am weak. I am nothing. I pray to you."

"Monstrous. Mighty. Ah, I'm not up to it. Come what will."

And some took off jackets, fingers flying, kneaded them, their breath fled, they dropped the jackets into the fire, covered their ears as they crackled and flared, sobbed helplessly, bitterly. "Where is salvation."

And always Kylin and Idatto, suspended in the firelight, called out: "Fire. Greenland."

Wheedling, driven, some removed a shawl, a ribbon, anything loose that they wore, bowing fawning at the tender calm face threw it gently arcing towards the proud crackling flames. They stood in the enfolding darkness, emerged again into the ruddy light of the fire.

Idatto freed himself from Kylin with a melting smile. His knees loosened, he stepped around the fire. Crept around the flames. Crept in a wide arc around the flames. Held his arms high, mouth open in exultation, said not a word. The

gaunt young man looked not at the fire but through air trembling with light, straight through to the needle-strewn forest floor. Bowed down every few steps. Circled the fire. And the people he passed stood up. His voice came: “Up! Stand up! All praise to the fire. Praise to Greenland. Praise to the volcanoes.” And the bent backs, slumped shoulders followed. Still sighing, shuddering sobbing in their fear; he kept circling. Kylin crouched in the dirt. As the groaning whispering procession passed by, he fainted, lay back in darkness.

Idatto moved away from the fire, ran shouting into the forest. People were climbing alone or in little groups, up from the valley of the Aire. Startled and frightened, they mingled with the circling line. Insistent questions. They knew they must separate. There was talk of Greenland. The fire blew hot; people pushed towards the flames, threw shawls and belts in with prayers and appeals, sought redemption. How many sank to their knees, overcome by fear.

They pulled Kylin to his feet. He stared into the mêlée, listened to the muttering calling screaming. Idatto led him. Kylin’s smile was bleak: “Are you afraid of me? I’m the one who burst open Herðubreið and Krafla. You’re not afraid. You can see what we made: this is fire. Great great fire. Don’t be afraid. Don’t flinch from it. Or from the volcanoes and Greenland. Otherwise they’ll be your jail-keeper, waiting to throw you in chains. Cast out fear. You must look at the fire for as long as you can bear it. Look at the great fire. Look.”

“Closer closer. It does not shatter us. Ah how it blooms. Salute it. Salute it. Salute Iceland. Our home. Bow down. Salute.”

Many fell down. Shouts rang through the forest.

Kylin stepped slowly to the fire, its flames catching on new logs. The leaders around him fell silent, spellbound by the fire, ecstatic reverent. Kylin let it show his hard face: “There it burns. Warms. Burning flames of fire. It tore open the volcanoes of Iceland. Burst glaciers apart. It’s like water, that sinks ships and keeps them afloat. A blessing we didn’t shrivel up and die in Shetland. Fear is gone from us. I bow my head. You burn when we approach. Be propitiated. Have mercy on us. Have mercy on us all.”

Idatto embraced Kylin.

“Now I ask you, Idatto, whether you will starve and die, or live. Do we have a right to die. The world a living being: what a tremendous thought. Is it possible to die, once we know this? Hark how they shout. They know it as we do. All humanity knows. It’s no magic spell that we keep hidden. Idatto, young man. We’ll soon part, go our separate ways. I must live, you too, these others. Praise the fire. And what we have seen. Now comes Life.”

Damatile, strong black-haired woman facing them, stretched out her arms in blessing, smiled through the slits of her closed eyes. Her voice clucked and trilled like a bird’s: “How could we ever have thought to stay together, let ourselves be killed. This is like a bath, a bliss that I lie in. The bath just now made ready for us, water poured in. We’ve just climbed in.”

Little sallow Shashara called out behind her: “Damatile.”

“Damatile is here, will not open her eyes.”

“Ah, there you are. It’s me, Shashara.”

“Shashara you say.”

“Damatile, I can explain. This is the fire we fetched in Iceland. I flew over Herðubreið, it had already broken open. These flames, it was these flames. I know them.”

“Yes, Shashara. And close your eyes, say what you feel. Put your hands behind your head like me, hold your head up. Don’t listen to the shouts. Just feel. Feel in your fingers, feel in your face, your mouth, feel in your body, down into your legs, your feet. Can you feel it. Ah, I cannot speak. Not through my lips. Ah Shashara, I can’t express it. Here it is again. Have no fear, just feel. Stand still. So sweet gentle gentle wild strong. In my throat, my knees, over my back, in my eyes. Ah. Burning flowing. So. So. I myself am burning. Don’t talk. Don’t talk.”

The other whispered, subdued: “No talking, Damatile.”

Idatto had climbed an ancient dead beech tree. He clung to splinters of the stump high above, daydreamed at the bustle below, the ever fiercer flames: “Dried leaves. Air. I shall let myself fall. Oh help me someone, so I don’t disappear.”

That evening and night the leaders tore themselves free from the last frenzy. Kylin drew the leaders to him in the night: he wanted to give them something before they parted: a symbol which they should guard well. He had a little dagger. The bronze hilt showed in relief the outline of an opened mountain, a flame shooting from it. Kylin heated the hilt, pressed the symbol first into Idatto’s lower arm. Every leader received the symbol that night. They curled over as pain shot through them, closed their eyes, were quieter than before.

As dawn broke the first small groups peeled away without farewells. When the fire died down towards noon, the little wood and the valley of the Aire were deserted.

PART NINE:
VENASKA

SWEET WILDERNESS

IN THE southeast of the country stood an age-old range of eroded mountains. It formed a gentle arc, worn to its base by water and rain. In the west its surface dropped to broad flat basin landscapes. Volcanoes had broken through an ancient granitic mass: here was the upthrust Cevennes, high land of the Auvergne, Feurs, Lyon. Mountain spates broke through undulating plateaux, narrow rocky valleys, cones of basalt and trachyte, layers of slag and ash. A crater might drop a hundred meters. The Rhone flowed down from the glaciers of Gotthard; rushing streams fed into her. She raced through narrow passes, poured her muddy water into sickle-shaped Lake Geneva, emerged from that basin deep blue. And when she broke through the Jura, gentle Saône came from the north to meet her. She mingled their waters, rolled on south. Wider and wider the river flowed across lavender- and myrtle-scented plains. Nearby regions sent more waters to her. The Alpine crags that had given birth to her closed in once more. Then the valley opened out. Swampy banks. Pebbles in a shallow bed. Fields of gravel down to the sea strand, desolate delta country. The lazy waters drifted on, met their end in the sea.

Garonne, mighty stream, eddying west through bottomland, gentle hills and vineyards. In the south, shimmering, the line of the Pyrenees white blue pink. Along the Atlantic coast the wind had built a barrier, the Landes; took sand north from Spain's sea-nibbled coast to pile it here in dunes. Few townzones occupied these two broad southern river basins. On the coasts, radiant menacing Marseilles, Bordeaux. Toulouse on the Garonne blared its domination of the region. Like the northern zones, these cities went underground with most of their inhabitants. Onto fertile surface land north of the Pyrenees – rubble deposited by ice-age glaciers – Settlers crept. They peopled the landscape of Provence with its palms and orange trees, settled along the banks of the great rivers.

Even before the struggle for Greenland ended, small bands of Settlers had left the British Isles, where extermination threatened. To the north and round about them, zones were already sinking into the depths as migrants snaked their way down the sycamore-filled valley of the lower Garonne and its rich meadowlands. White Baker came with her band to this country once ruled by Melise, cruel queen of Bordeaux. They flowed into the basin bordered by the Pyrenees, the massif to the east, the ocean. Moved through the Charente's warm wetlands, beneath sweet chestnuts coming into leaf, dark elms, leafy crowns of nut trees, over meadows and vine-covered ridges. In forests, sunny clearings, endless farmland gone to wilderness they disappeared among the older communities of half-Spanish and African Settlers.

Freed from the zones, they flourished in the Charente valley and along the broad banks of the Garonne. Migrating Snakes brought from Britain their arcane doctrine of immersion in erotic embraces, raptures. Around Perigueux and Bergerac, down to the mouth of the Gironde where once-flourishing Romans had built ramparts, these men and women swung between quiescence and enthusiasm. Not here Britain's gloom, its mists, cold winds, frosts. The powers of the zones evaporated. Here only the Mistral was to be feared, and devastating thunderstorms in spring and summer, springtime floods running up from the mouth of mighty Gironde to cover the fields. Slumbering wilderness, gardens, golden broom, crumbling roadways. Now and then they flinched as lightning flashed. Planes and wagons of the townzones deep below scraped up piles of sand and stones, broke blocks from soft crags, carried them down to the Meki-factories. On the seashore you could see great air-freighters that daily brought salts acids loads of rock from the north. The migrants settled unobstructed on the fertile land. They settled in farmsteads beside verdant grassy vine-covered fields, age-old swamps and bottomlands, on bumps in the landscape thick with growth, under the tall trunks of cherry laurels, beside wild twiggy acacias that dangled their leafy thatch over little streams.

And as people went over the soft fragrant ground, inhaling the scent of vines and herbs, there came a profound urge to come together after such a long time of alienation. On the heels of White Baker's band of Snakes came group after group of fugitive Settlers, from Britain Flanders Franconia Jutland, who like them were captivated. Such a boundless Now, refreshing self-renewal. Every breath a stimulus to self-realisation, everything upended.

DIUVA

SERVADAK sat alone beneath a cherry laurel in full leaf, a young blond person still very pale; called across to Light-for-me, the woman who had settled near him on the bank of the Dordogne. Oh she should come to him. She had already gone many times with him to the thicket where a holy cabin stood, had embarked with him on the sweet voyage. He always called as if for the first time, Light-for-me liked this. He sat under the knotty laurel with its untidy tangle of branches. She laughed through pea stalks: "Servadak, you're just like a root the way you sit there. Look up: it grows so green out of you."

"Light-for-me, you've toiled enough."

"See my arms, Servadak, how thick they are. They grow thicker every day. I expect they'll burst. I'm so happy."

“Who are you working for so hard?”

“And if I have children, Servadak, who will provide their food.”

“I’ll feed them. And the others.”

“I have arms, Servadak, they are my children. I don’t just sit under a tree. Look at my peas.”

“Come here, Light-for-me.”

“That’s what the peas say: come. And my hens. And the truffles.”

“Come, Light-for-me. Light of my eyes. My willow. I sit here just for you, to look on your garden, I’m happy when you walk by. Look at my peas. Are they nothing?”

She laughed. “They’re a mess. All those red weeds! I won’t help you, come picking time.”

“Come closer.”

“You want to go to the cabin? But I don’t want to.”

“I just want you closer.”

“What for, Servadak.”

“It helps me. It helps me if you come just one step closer.”

“Ah my friend, it makes me sad to see you so pale. How long since we left Bedford.”

“I’d been away a hundred years already. When I saw you by the chalk cliffs on that northern coast, the hundred years were up. That was yesterday. Or today. Today I saw you for the first time. Just now I saw you for the first time. Come, Light-for-me.”

“Same old song, Servadak. Whenever I come to my peas there you are, like the thrush.”

“But the other thrush responds.”

“I am responding.”

“You’re not a thrush. You don’t respond to me.” He stretched an arm out to her. She bent her head to the stalks, wept, fiddled with pea sticks, came slowly then faster towards him, as he knelt let him kiss her and she kissed him gently on the mouth, eyes.

Next day he called to her again, and the next. She was always there, tender, brown-black curly hair, slim figure, always lively, a little tired, her attention lighting always first on trees earth people, more radiant and open every day than any fine lady. She wore the drab work-clothes of a British Settler, long grey-brown jacket, black trousers loose, tied at knee and ankle. As she tucked the bright headscarf behind her ears, he stood up beneath the laurel tree. She called: “Hey, Servadak, I brought you something. A nice jacket. Look, they all wear such bright jackets.”

“Who do?”

“Snakes. Men. Lots of them.”

“Light-for-me, I am not a Snake.”

She was shocked, came closer. “Don’t say that. All of us are.”

“You know I’m definitely not.”

“No, don’t say that. I won’t listen. Don’t frighten me.”

“What are you giving me? A scarf? A jacket? If you want, if it’s from your hand, I’ll wear it.”

“Thank Heavens! Oh Servadak, stand up from under that tree. You won’t get better sitting there. So pale, you look as if you only just left London.”

“I left London a hundred years ago. It’s not true, I’m not pale. I work, look at my vines, Light-for-me.”

“I came to give you this pretty jacket.”

“Come here then!”

She was at his side. “Stop hugging me, Servadak. Take off your smock. Look, it’s green wool. Do you like it? It’s pretty. You’ll look good in it.”

“I’ll look good? Let’s see. How do I look?”

“Good, good, wonderful. You can see for yourself.”

“I’ll wear it always.”

“No, you are not to grab at me all the time. Let me look at you. Aren’t you fine. Would you like to come singing with me tomorrow?” And she led him gaily across his field, called to the rows of beans, showed him to the laurel tree. “Servadak’s betrayed you, laurel tree. He won’t sit under you now. He needs light. He wants to keep moving. He must strut around.”

She led him to her garden. “This is Servadak. How do you like his bright jacket. Isn’t it pretty, like my headscarf. Come, I’ll put a fresh garland of peashoots around your neck. Well, peashoots, what do you say to Servadak’s jacket?”

“Let me hold the garland.”

“No, leave it around your neck.”

“I want to hold it. It’s from you. You cared for it. And when it wilts I’ll squeeze it between my palms and its life, no, your life, will flow into my shoulders.” She turned aside with a sigh.

“What’s up, my Light?”

“Call me something else.”

“But you are my Light.”

“Call me something else. I want to be called Crocus or Little Breeze or – I am Mayelle, as I always was.”

“You’re sad.”

“Yes. You don’t want my garland, Servadak, you don’t want anything. I’ll take it off.”

“My Light.”

“Say Mayelle to me. You don’t even like the light.”

“Oh!”

“Oh. Yes, oh, Servadak, my night-moth. Oh you are sick from London.”

“So many people I miss, Mayelle. Now I have you. Don’t be cross.”

Bronzed Mayelle kept herself to herself, said not a word at the great gathering in front of Diuva, the woman who led this group of Snakes. Servadak came often to her, invited her to the cabin; she embarked on the voyage with him in both joy and sadness. She waited to see if he would change. But after each voyage he came back still more wildly yearning. Her garden lay alongside Servadak’s; his eyes spent half the day gazing at her trees her ground her peapods artichokes herbs. Always she waited for him to see her herbs her fruit trees, whether he would delight in her hens. He delighted, but as his smile showed, only in her. Close by their gardens was a quiet lake. She swam blissfully in the limpid water. Servadak whooped beside her; she let him kiss her embrace her in the water, saw his face contort with ardour. She ran to her hut, threw herself down: “Oh what what should I do! What should I do! He’s not sick. I want to be good for him, he’s dreadful. He suffers. He’s devouring me. What to do.”

She let herself be taken to gentle bright-eyed Diuva, who laughed: “I’ll tell you, Mayelle. You live alone out there, far from us all with your Servadak. If you lived nearer and came to us more often, you’d know already: this happens a thousand times. It’s nothing unusual for men and women. They’re all so happy to have one another, after such a time of deprivation. And now they are too happy.”

“But I can’t help complaining about him, Diuva. He works, does what he has to, but he never sees anything. He eats without tasting. I saw when he sat beside me: it’s all the same to him if I give him gherkins or mustard or baked truffles. He gulps it down, laughs, is happy.”

“Because you are there.”

Mayelle cried: “Yes, because I’m there. But isn’t he crazy.”

“Oh child. Like many others.”

Mayelle cried: “Help me, Diuva. He’s a good man, Servadak. He suffered horribly in London. He knew nothing but machines and playing and lounging around. He told me. And then he came to us. How lovely it could be with us. But it is not.” Diuva took young Mayelle on her lap, pondered: “There’s one thing I must tell you. When you came away from London, don’t believe you left all your sorrows behind, Mayelle. Sorrows and misfortune are not just in London. They follow everywhere that people set their feet. Even here, where all is as sweet as the Garden of Eden, even here on the Garonne.”

“I’m not afraid of sorrow.”

“You could kill Servadak quickly, Mayelle, when you’re on your voyage in the cabin. Is that what you want. Yes. Many have done so, girls and men. It’s no torment. Between a voyage with the beloved and dying, there’s barely a step. It is not he, friend Servadak, who dies. When he’s transported, curls over your body, lets himself fall, gushes his essence, he doesn’t at that moment have the soul of Servadak. You simply spare him the return. Leave him on the other side. You’ve gone quiet.”

Mayelle was long silent on the leader’s lap, snuggled at her breast. Breathed: “I couldn’t.”

“I know. Because you yourself are voyaging with him at that moment.”

Mayelle, breathing at her breast: “He’s so gentle. My moth. I can’t hurt him.”

“We must think of something else.”

Mayelle put her arms around the woman’s neck: “You’re cross with me, Diuva.”

“Stop teasing, little butterfly. Will you leave your moth to me? Maybe I can tame him. Maybe he’s a Snake, a real one with venemous fangs, and I must remove the ring from his foot.”

Later: “Servadak, Diuva has invited you to see her.”

“I don’t go to anyone else, Mayelle, my Light. Never again. Are you sending me away?”

“She wants to see you.”

“I can come to you now, I’ve sat long enough under this tree.” He was at her side. “I know you complained about me, Mayelle, you went to Diuva and asked her for help about me. I don’t care. You’ve complained to my face often enough. But I just can’t leave you. I have an avowal to make, my hand my throat my curlyhead my planet my sun my Earth my night my day. I can only tell you the tenth part of what I feel for you. I wouldn’t dare to tell more. But I can’t hold it in.”

“Don’t squeeze me so, Servadak, sweet Servadak.”

“You’re ashamed that you went to Diuva about me.”

“What are you saying, Servadak, sweet Servadak. You’re flying away.”

“This very moment.”

“Why have you shut your eyes, sweet Servadak.”

He held tight to her on the bench, head to head: “Now – I won’t open my eyes again. Ever.”

“Oh go on, open them.”

“Never.”

“What do you mean?”

“Nothing. Diuva of the Snakes will send her agents for me. They’ll come one day and fetch me away. They’ve fetched

others away. So I've heard."

"Let go of me."

"No, Mayelle. I am here. Here. With you. With your blue and green headscarf, come, I'll wind it around my neck. Now your skin lies against mine. They'll have to cut me away from you. I have you. Here my knee with yours, my head with yours."

"Let me *go*, Servadak. I'm choking."

"I'm not choking you."

"I'm falling." And she tumbled from the bench onto soft grassy earth.

"Mayelle, sweet life, I know what's coming. Maybe it's right, but I can't bear it. Aya, look at you there." He breathed heavily, grabbed at her.

She screamed. "What have I done to you, Servadak. I was always good to you. I helped you in your garden. How often did we go to the cabin together."

"When you were there it was good. When you weren't there it was over. Now it's good. I was burning with desire. I still feel it almost, when I hold you tight. I can't bear it any more. I can't. Be good and surrender to it, Mayelle, don't curse me."

"I shall die in your arms, Servadak. Don't embrace me here. Stop tearing my clothes."

He groaned suffered, was buried in rapture: "It's Servadak here beside you. Nothing will happen to him. You can kill him. Take my gardening knife, kill me. I won't leave this sweet throat again. I'll stay here forever. Forever."

"Help. Who will help me." But it was just a whimper. Then she sighed, lay limp, fainting.

After a while the aroused overwrought man noticed her silence. He climbed to his feet, slung her slight body over his shoulder, strolled to his garden, laid her on the bed in his hut. How she sat up. How she looked about. He lay on the floor, smiled at her.

"What's going on? Where are you?"

"Here with you, Mayelle." She jumped up, her eyes darted about the room: "This is your hut."

"Yes."

"You were to go to Diuva."

"I was. And instead, Mayelle has come to me. You'll be with me forever, Mayelle. Forever."

"I'm going to my garden."

"You can. You will. It's my garden too. This hut is your hut and my hut. You live here now."

"No."

"For sure you live here now, Mayelle. I can't allow anything else. You can't force me to kill myself. I have you here. And shall keep you."

"You're sick."

"Maybe. I can't live without you. Mayelle, my life, you are part of my body. You're here now and will always be with me. We belong together like a tree and its shade; no one can separate them." He was trembling, a hand at her waist. She had no idea who he was. She was ready to cry in anguish. She turned to face him, took his head in her hands, pulled his face to her for a kiss, looked into it, implored protested shook him.

"Now, Servadak! You are still my friend. Still my sweet root under the laurel tree. Come, sit here. I'll sit at your side. You can look at me, hear my hens clucking, call to them. You can throw stones at the sparrows to keep them off my peas. The lime tree outside my hut is in flower. Servadak! You! It's all so delightful."

"Only you are delightful."

"Don't say that. Listen to me. Oh, you frighten me so. But still, you are my joy."

"You are my only joy."

Now she squealed in dismay, so shrilly he let her go, stood up. She rushed to the door, turned to him as he stood dispirited by the bed, ran back to him. He mumbled, looked like a poleaxed bullock: "Don't go. Oh Mayelle. Don't go." But he made no move. She pulled away after laying him on the bed, he was quite passive.

"I'm going to my hut. I'll be back soon." She slipped away, quietly latched the door, stood listening, ran to her garden. On the grassy patch in front of her hut she flung herself down among flapping hens and doves, begged the pain to go away, wept sobbed until her chest hurt.

And then she had to put on her headscarf, her face was red and swollen. "Diuva, I have come to you. Alone. Servadak, my friend, didn't want to. I don't know what should happen. Make him better. Help us. Do with us what you want."

"You've been crying. What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Sit quite still. Don't cry. No more tears, Mayelle, you feather, you scrap of silk. Don't change. Do you know the sunset, Mayelle, at the seashore, across the Gironde towards Bordeaux. Such stupendous colours, everything swimming in gold and red, a roaring thundering confusion. And the sea can't keep still; the whole surface quivers, and the air. Such a glow, purple. And then it grows quiet. Then suddenly from your little hill you see trees. Trees emerge from the ground, hidden black branches against the clear sky. Were there before, but you couldn't see them. And as you look at them, how squiggly they are all around the thick trunk, all black – the sky turns pale. Becomes white and empty. But it only seems so at that first moment: it's not white. Delicate blue shades are there, streaks and misty patches, like breaths; reddish

violet, already dissolved into white. I watch it evening after evening as it comes over us from the sea. Finally there you stand and the trees are fully present: fields and hills spread out before you. Darkness bending away into darkness, and sinking ever deeper with us into darkness. Mayelle, people always come to me like this, with this glow of purple and gold. There are no gardens, no trees, no truffles artichokes peas. Who knows anything of hens. Only the purple the thundering the sinking away, death. What do they do, Mayelle, your grass and your peas? I am Diuva. We are on the Garonne, driven out of London, of Britain."

"I have to tell you, Diuva, I'm so upset, I feel so ashamed. I've been insulted and humiliated by Servadak. I just feel it, I don't know how. Oh I must pull myself together."

"There are hens in that field. What are they doing? Let them run away and die. You planted artichokes."

"And my trees are good, and the animals are good, and the day is good. And everything would be good, even Servadak. No," she whimpered suddenly, pressed herself to the woman, whose eyes opened wide, "he *was* good. Take him away from me. It must happen. I can't tell you why. Take him away somewhere. I don't want to hate. I'll lose myself, and all of you."

"Of course I'll do it, Mayelle. This now is the purple or the violet, and the trees."

"Away with him, Diuva. Take him, take my sweet friend. I can't stop myself. Do it for me."

Thrushes sang, as they had so often heard. Doves fluttered. Agents of the Snakes appeared at Servadak's hut; he was waiting for them. "Don't take off my ring," he groaned, as they went for the Snake-symbol at his foot. They took him west to another settlement. He burned like a fire lit in a windy chimney. Spicy dark red Medoc flowed into him. Servadak leapt, his body stretched. Mayelle was far away, stayed far away.

A tremendous blood-red over Bordeaux, the lapping water all ablaze. Sky yellowing, air turning pale, great night rocking like a huge ship on the sea. Vineyards brooks human voices singing. And the wine flowed through Servadak. Stars gleamed. Chestnuts, fragrant roses, magnolias: there they were. Everything. Servadak curled up on his bed of straw. When would his crossing from London be completed. There was weeping in him: far away on the Garonne there is – who? Light-for-me. Mayelle. She walks in her garden, around the cherry laurel, curly hair, brown eyes open. Don't think of her. Away with Mayelle.

MOON GODDESS

AROUND Toulouse, in a fair landscape of milk-white magnolias, yucca stems with yellow dangling bells, moved Venaska, a slender woman with light brown skin and thick black hair. She came from the south into this region of Snakes. The slant of her eyes, the shape of her face were more Malay than European. Some called her Moon Goddess. In the mild fertile lands of the young Garonne she soon achieved a similar status to Diuva farther north. With the calm sure slow motion of her coolwarm body – delicate frame of bone, downy skin – she entered unobtrusively into the circles of the Snake Settlers. A slightly mocking smile played around full lips. The face was veiled in calm solemnity, quite soulful, so soulful that those she encountered were smitten, at once abashed and joyous, readily led by her. With a small number of women and men she lived for a long time on the broad Canal du Midi, the little Saune river. She went about unrecognised in a summery yellow Settler costume, which she wore even though she never toiled. People brought her lobsters from the fishing grounds, small tasty sardines, plump salmon. They vied to see who should bring her sweet small gherkins, aubergines from their fields. Any who brought wine drank with her.

She went about in loose yellow Settler trousers, a wide blouse with green and black ribbons at the throat, went arm in arm with men and women, watched with shepherds in lush meadowlands, went with a dreamy smile amid the chatter of her companions along winding hill paths, played with her long coral earrings, waved her dusky hand at a peasant woman in a bright headscarf. As she went on, a last backward glance from her dark radiant eyes made the heart stand still. All who encountered her and spoke to her, especially women, were thrilled, spellbound. All longed for the cool firm hand always gently moving. And when Venaska had passed by, they felt in the throat the chest that something had happened. They ran like the wind, clothes choked them, their eyes glowed. They must speak, babble, heart beating fast, could not be calmed. [38]

Dusky Venaska gave out nothing she did not feel. Often, standing with a woman she did not know, eye to eye across a fence, a hedge, reaching out a hand, she grew pale, bit her lip, turned away in confusion. What she gave from her weakened her. From Iceland across the Arctic Ocean, among the ships of the expeditionary fleet there had come sailing those great freighters, hangars filled with taut gently buzzing glimmering Tourmaline webbing. Fishes birds had drawn alongside the freighters as they sailed, seaweed algae had grown up from the sea floor: at night the ships glowed, reared up from the water's surface. Just so did people on the hills and along the banks of the Canal du Midi and the Saune turn from the land, the harrow, towards the slim erect figure who was like one of their own, whose glance whose voice caught at the heart with painful poignancy.

For this woman, who came from Marseille declaring she had no wish to follow the city underground, they fashioned a low Settler cottage of beechwood under an old wall. Fig trees with loose dark crowns clung to the ancient stones, their brown twiggy branches reached across to the other side. Dark green the leaves, rough with hairs, the underside pale and soft-haired. Venaska often held the pearshaped purple fruit in her hands, rolled it, raised it to her chin. “This is a god, you know, a goddess. So smooth outside, it’ll grow darker, brownblack. And inside is green flesh, red flesh, it tastes good. It holds the seeds. That’s the fig, my goddess.” In her black hair she fastened sprigs with young fruit, presented others with precious leaves that she had stroked and breathed on. Thus she went along the gently flowing Saune, slim and supple on long legs, belly arcing forward slightly. Whenever in passing she laid an arm on someone’s shoulder, solemn and strangely remote, they felt as they glanced smitten into the smooth face: I’ve never known what a woman is. Or what a human is, really.

She never knew embarrassment. As if it constrained her, she often removed her light jacket, walked on, her bare dark smooth upper body swaying. And then, near to people, her arms became tendrils seeking something to wind around. Her breasts rose and fell gently evenly with her breathing, always joyful. Other human tendrils, male and female arms, twined with hers. Venaska, her gaze resting on the other, cooed, spoke lovingly, purred. She had no idea how strong was the impression she made. The other hanging on her shuddered in delight, no longer importuning, lips open in devotion; for swiftly vanishing seconds had an inclination to disengage, pull back. Venaska’s eyes would begin to widen, to glow deep black in motherly distress. The one at her breast had surrendered.

She would stroke the shoulders, ears, back of the head, brush across the nose-ridge, her eyes flashing. The moment came when the other fell asleep in her arms, tolerated her comforting touch: what is this creature closing in on my body, touching my body as it glides away. Smooth arms slid over belly and thighs, sought with every part of the body to sink roots into the other. This jostling rolling in the dirt sliding around down up, nailing together pulling apart thrusting away. The masterful angry scolding cry as if with a being not present, splutter groan scold beg threaten rage. And again the shudders smiles soft whisperings begging cajoling embracing. Bracing as if with dammed-up energy, body stiffened on extended toetips, curving fingers arms bent back as if unable to discharge. And then a groaning shattering blinding breakdown, clouds lightning thunder blazing. The entity in the body of dusky surging Venaska was moved, uplifted like a ship at sea, its life churned up. The body struggled to assert itself. All distinction between death and life disappeared, the sweetness gulped it down, drowned it in the storm. Twitched at tempestuous Venaska. The bodies surged into one another.

And as the other lay there steaming, Venaska stood maneshaking, leaned on a gatepost, breathed, deeper deeper. She swallowed air down like a drink, wandered into the yard, buried her hands in the fig tree’s dark foliage, let twigs and leaves whip against her. Reappeared as soft flowing Venaska, slender hips swaying as she walked, smooth-skinned dusky body, around her mouth a mocking smile. Even her toneless call was music; dread and yearning all about her. She wore her crimson blouse with the gold embroidery, sat in grass, a bright dormant volcano.

Toulouse had gone underground. Settlers took over the ruined streets parks woodlands. Venaska settled in Toulouse. She had her many followers clear away stones and streetcar rails from the huge roaring now buried city. She wanted to sit here in this plain, see the dark line of the Pyrenees, the jagged white comb on the horizon, beside the glorious age-old basilica of Saint Sernin which the townzone had left untouched. The Snakes who came with her had no idea what drew her to this ruined city. Venaska liked to walk among the silent blasted walls, along dead streets, listening fearfully to her footfall. She crept curious around the rubble of factories, hid when the zone’s freight-fliers appeared overhead. Rapt, hugging herself in delight, she stood by the cold stones of Saint Sernin; she loved this mighty structure straining out of the ground. She often said: this building, that’s why I sit here, it’s so wonderful. She was keeping watch so nothing would happen to it.

Snakes and foreign Settlers spread out across the realms of Diuva and Venaska. They flourished along the Garonne and the wide Rhone. Alongside the ruins of levelled factories stood Roman triumphal arches with inscriptions about rebellious Gauls. Banks of seats and steps rose up on hillsides: Roman amphitheatres built two or three thousand years before. At grey Avignon, Cathedral Rock abutted the blue Rhone; the thirty-nine sombre towers of the Papal Palace had crumbled, overgrown with pines oaks flowering shrubs. Settlers from noisy cramped European townzones laid their sick and recuperating bodies on the unexhausted land, to die or flame back into life. Venaska in her scarlet gold-embroidered blouse proceeded through the lush valley of the Garonne into regions where powerful Melise once ruled. She awoke the landscape. A melting all around Venaska. After she left, people ground their teeth in longing. Something blind and screaming was aroused in many who resisted; she elicited it.

Men went about intent on rapine, women too. They cared nothing for the Snakes’ secret doctrine, for the voyage and its sanctity. They took pleasure in bringing men and women down. In the region of the ancient bishopric of Perigueux a man calling himself Sivri, with the help of his mother, barricaded himself and six unwilling wives in his farmhouse. He had just recovered his health, was strong, not young; people said his mother put him up to it. He made the women toil for him. He took pleasure in tormenting other women. His every move showed that he considered women worthless. Snakes were powerless against him, since he was no longer one of their own.

In the landscapes of the Garonne appeared figures neither male nor female, of the various races wandering in this region. This was the highest rapture many ever experienced. White or tawny people with a soft rounding of the shoulders moved gracefully along paths beneath showers of acacia blossom, strolled through meadows, climbed into forests. The zones had nurtured all kinds of deformity; little attention was given to individual cases amid the epidemics and general

decay. Now the land produced a lush crop of these beings, who grew up as girls and went about as girls, wide hips gently swaying, some shy and reluctant to reveal their secret, some in a raffish mix of clothing: on the head a man's cap and plume, but a bulge of breasts evident under the tight blouse. They swarmed about girls they didn't know, playfully let themselves be hugged. And with tender importunity they allowed the peculiarity of their gender to be felt; sensed with hot shivers the shock and rapture of the girl, the woman, who knew not what she was enjoying, was it a girlfriend or a male lover. They had never felt such strong spice in an embrace. And young men were drawn strongly towards hybrids that they took for cheeky girls. A curious charm pulled them on. They fell at the feet of these girls, were shocked and obscurely moved, speechless as this riddle, this girlish youth, wriggled in their arms importunate devouring.

What terrors confusions tears did red-haired Tika On arouse, she who came down from Auvergne dressed in violet and pink, shunned work, sang and unsettled even Venaska. A wild creature, this Tika On, she sang with a clear boyish voice, laughed. She herself was unsure of her gender, bestowed passionate kisses on men and women alike. A hug was enough to bring her to ecstasy. Mostly she broke away in disgust from any who demanded more of her. And any who tried to take her by force fled at once from her dreadful screams and cries, fled for hours in confusion. As if gender was for her a dreadful wound. She attached herself to Venaska, who was always gentle and sweet. In the end the lady of Toulouse had to tear herself away; for the first time the face of brown tender teasing Venaska showed signs of fear. So distraught was she that she had to cry help to those who watched over her: keep that red creature Tika On away from me. The wooden hut beside the cathedral where Venaska lived during those weeks was besieged by the scolding creature. Venaska wept: "She senses who she is. She's on the brink of sensing it. Don't be cross with me, but I just can't help her. She's giving birth, I can't help her." For months Tika On pestered Venaska, then she vanished to the north.

King Charles of Valois, buried a thousand years in a northern landscape, galloped panting out of the forest, plunged into the maelstrom. Whooped and rampaged as of yore. The forests where he used to hunt were overgrown now. On the snowy peaks of Auvergne, on the Plomb du Cantal he chased wild boar; halloo'd along the Allier valley, picked fights. His noble nose had a drinker's glow. He struck the heads off donkeys.

Heated beings were cast onto the landscape, thrown up by a seething humanity. Local spirits, driven centuries ago back into thickets and rocks, swarmed out like bees over a field of clover, darted, coiled, invaded hot pulsing human blood, flowed into black sleek shining hair, made themselves at home in leaping male knees, plump female breasts. A single person had never been enough for debauched la Mole, grown pale and thin under a rock, since the time when he first had bones, and every Mass presented him with a pretty new conquest – until the king cut off his head. For centuries he had been skulking, almost wasted away. Now this cloudburst over the parched countryside. He aimed frantically for human bodies, occupied them. The Marquis de La Mole, whose head a man soon to die had once struck off, now ran about in six bodies, controlled six bodies. He was a Cyclops; he could change bodies. He squatted in them, drove them like a cart, abandoned them like a broken machine part. Young Blaise de Montluc, the Gascon, clambered hatless from the waters of the Garonne where he had drowned centuries before. The waters could not wash him away. He scrambled up the treelined bank, strutted as a pert small-breasted girl across yellow fields among vineyards, tried to hitch a ride in the fleeing Tika On. Then one day in bright sunshine he jumped down the throat of a black stallion and went racing off. The droughty land steamed and shuddered. Venaska roamed from place to place, Diuva consoled on the Garonne.

PRECIPICE

IN THE Cevennes, on the herb-scented green-lawned hump of the Puy de Dôme, the first of the Iceland expeditionaries appeared, trickling down into the lowlands of Aquitaine. Small bands of leather-clad sombre dull-eyed yearning people. They trudged with their horses more slowly when they came under an ever more azure sky to this fertile region of weathered lava, miles of gardens on every side, rose bushes flaunting yellow red. Blooming Touraine. Wooded riverbanks, newly cleared fields. These men and women who had stood on oil clouds sniffed the new air, looked about, shook themselves. It burrowed so strangely into them. They went dubiously through the glimmering landscape. Kylin, about to leaving the green Loire, stood on the cliff of Amboise, wandered through its caverns ravines corridors of rock. A multitude of prisoners had been executed here; they raged about him, drove him away. Rebels beheaded in sunny courtyards; blue-eyed blonde women had laughed. Idatto heaved a sigh: "Down there is the south. I don't want to be here, and I daren't go there."

"Idatto, don't be afraid of the fog. In the north there was fire and fog, we had to pass through it. And it's there in the south."

"I can see. But it calls to me. I don't want to be tempted."

"We must. Don't hold back. We made it through Iceland. Don't be afraid. There was fog there, and there's fog here."

They trudged on through the landscape. They had never made it in the end to Marduk. On the Loire they were told about White Baker. She had strength enough to bring Settlers over from Britain, then sank back into herself. Like a tree

that has long flourished, and as it ages draws layer after layer of bark about itself, walls itself in, pulls a visor over its face, its roots lignify and petrify, White Baker buried herself on the warm Gironde, not far from Diuva. She dropped to the mossy ground like a beetle, and let soft blankets draw about her. White Baker busied herself by the river like the others, helped in fields and gardens. But her expression was blank, a simulacrum of solemnity. Face red and unwrinkled. She sat for hours in Diuva's room, stared through the open door, let the breezes play on her. She wore brown Settler garb, her heavy plump hand rested on the little table with its knotted bunches of herbs and stalks, among them a scrap of silk tied with a leather thong. Rachenila's crow-beak dangled from it. On the wall, bulky quite undamaged, a brocade senatorial gown. Diuva guarded it well. It was the abode of befuddling spirits that only she could understand.

Near the former Montauban, red Tika On flounced into Kylin's group. "What bird is this that's been sent to us," wondered hard Kylin, surprised but letting her stay. There was already unease in his group, a sweet suffering oppression. Kylin saw how defensive they were. Tika On with her red hair was a thorn in their side. She had to cling to human limbs, test herself. When Kylin saw how she hugged women of the group, how Idatto knelt before her, he withdrew for half a day. Then he acted as if he desired her. She followed him purring squealing all excited into bushes. There he strangled her.

Men searching him out that evening found him in a thicket among yellow broom and stinging nettles, beside the coiled red body. They wanted to lift the corpse, take it away for burial. Kylin threatened: "Don't touch. Call the others. Where are the women." He waited for the women and Idatto. "Who is this? Look! Tika On, and her red hair. Woman or man. Just look at her a moment. So. You've been caught red-handed. Into the scrub with her!" He rolled her body deeper into the thicket, came back pale: "I strangled her. Idatto, do you know why."

Idatto in tears, mouth quivering, bitter: "She was no criminal."

"That's it. I knew it. The fog. It's taken you. But we are not defenceless. I say its name, I see it, and it's gone."

Idatto bit his lip, wailed, hid his face. Suddenly a little black-haired woman burst into sobs. Kylin glared at her, roared: "Did you see what it was lying here? You didn't look close enough. Bring her back. Yes, here!" He pulled scrub away from the little corpse. "There she is. I strangled her. What do you say to that, Idatto? And you?"

"Cover her, Kylin, please."

"I've sat by the corpse half the day; you haven't looked enough."

A tawny bearded man stepped up to Kylin, pulled his hand from the bush. "It's not easy for Idatto and the others. We won't argue. Who knows where our path leads. Give us time." Kylin stood still, arms crossed: "The land demands sacrifices. It can never devour enough of us. It's good to have the brand on our arm, good to keep it in mind."

Idatto, sobbing sullen on the bearded man's shoulder: "Was Tika On a criminal? Was she not alive, a living thing, and I entitled to kneel before her?"

Kylin mumbled something, his eyes flickered. He hurried away. They wanted to burn the body before nightfall. Kylin screamed: "Fire? No fire! Into the Earth. Into the Earth, I say."

Growing tension and coolness set in between Kylin and his group as they moved south. They wanted to settle here or there in the fertile landscape, but Kylin urged them coldly on with no explanation. Many of the hardened people melted as they spread across the land; they stayed behind in settlements, ploughed sang laughed with the strong the blessed on the Garonne, in Languedoc, on the banks of the Rhone. They felt redeemed. Now the primeval monsters lost their horror, Iceland let go of them.

Kylin had set his murder of Tika On as a warning sign at the threshold of this land; it had no effect. He could count on only a few of those with him. Clearly he was struggling and suffering like the rest, could not give voice to it, was plunging ever deeper into the land in an angry mood. Long grey-blonde whiskers grew on his cheeks and chin; he walked a little stooped. People seldom dared speak to him.

One day near Toulouse, word came that Venaska was in the vicinity. The golden woman in her crimson shirt, gold-threaded trousers gave him her hand in a field of strawberries. "Venaska, it's you. I've been wandering around. I've long wanted to speak with you."

"And now you've met me."

"Do you know me?"

"No. I shall give you a name."

"Don't. I'm Kylin. These with me are others from Greenland."

"Greenland is far away. I'm glad to see you." She stroked his shoulder; he shrank from her gentleness.

"Venaska, I must tell you something. It has nothing to do with Greenland. Over near Montauban we came upon a red-haired woman, a strange creature, Tika On. I killed her."

Her hand dropped from his shoulder; she bent her head: "Oh." She looked at the dark ground, stood arms slack, tonelessly called a name. Two women stood up from the strawberry beds, ran to her. Venaska's voice weak, accusing: "This man is called Kylin. He killed Tika On. Near Montauban." The women angry, confused. Venaska's head hung.

Kylin: "I have nothing to say to these. I want to see you alone, Venaska."

Her head did not move: "I can't. You will kill me."

"I am not a murderer."

"You are. I sense it." She took one of the women by the arm: "Come to the house with us. We'll sit together."

She kept the door and windows open, sat in a corner, for a while no one spoke. "What do you want with me, Kylin? Your name is Kylin. Your name is Hoyet Sala, the Precipice."

“I must come to know you. We voyaged to Greenland, we were sent there, Venaska. The zones that have now perished sent us. We were in Iceland, island of volcanoes, on Greenland. I myself helped carry out the Senate’s plan. That’s the first point. The second: it has showered something dreadful over us, has jolted me and the others who are still alive. That’s the second point. Then we, then I took the bait. I wanted what was being showered upon us. I submitted. I can’t explain it any clearer. And because I did this, I put Tika On out of the way. There was nothing else to be done. I never sought her out, she came to us.”

“Hoyet Sala, I hear only the tone of your words. What do you want from me.”

The bearded man looked coolly at her: “You didn’t come, I had to seek you out. Come closer so I can feel you.”

“Do you know what you’re asking.”

“Yes.”

The thought in him: this is the fog. I pray. If I am to die, then so be it. Then I’ll be useless, no one’s business.

She stood up in the corner: “Turn your back. Don’t look at me.”

He paused, thought: it’s nothing to do with me. But only for moments. Suddenly he relaxed; it’s decision time; I dared the test; either I come under her protection, or not. He turned his back. Venaska was still in the corner. Her gentle voice: “It does me good to let me see you. I have done you an injustice. I am coming to you.” Glided towards him, drew him to the window, smiled to the girl who stepped into the doorway: “Stay outside please.” Standing in the middle of the room she pressed her face into his rumpled leather jacket, placed her hands about his head. “I listened to your tone, Hoyet Sala. Now I make the voyage to Greenland. There. Nothing will happen to me. The Precipice will not harm me. Listen out there! Our birds! Birds! No harm!” She let go with a smile, took his hands in hers, hummed: “Still I am afraid of you, Hoyet Sala. But you will do nothing to me. Something in you is germinating for me. Let it not spoil.”

“Where are you going?”

“To fetch milk.” She drank, offered him the glass: “Do me this favour. So I am not afraid.” The thought in him: perhaps I shouldn’t have killed Tika On, perhaps I should have dealt with her like this. He drank from her glass.

“And will you go now, Hoyet Sala?”

“I thought I’d stay two days here. I had evil intentions, Venaska.”

“And now?”

“Now I’ll go back.”

“And never come again?”

He smiled: “You’re still afraid of me, Venaska. Your milk was good, and I drank from your glass. I shall tell my friends –”

“What?”

“I don’t know yet. That you named me Precipice, Hoyet Sala. And –.” He sat back in his chair, took out his dagger, closed his eyes. She regarded him a while. His eyes opened: “It’s been good, with you. I don’t need two days. I came here, Venaska, I confess, determined to show you no mercy. Tika On, no point talking about her, she had to go. I was afraid that you would – nullify what became of us in Greenland.”

“And now? And again now? Do I not know you, Hoyet Sala? As soon as I saw you I wanted to give you this name.” She wanted to fall at his feet.

“Kiss the dagger.”

“Is this what you – ?”

“No. I used my hands. You must kiss the dagger.” She hugged Kylin, wept to his face. He muttered darkly: “Stop, Venaska. Kiss the dagger.”

“Must I?” He shivered, shook her off, clenched his fists, eyes bleak: “Kiss the dagger.” He held out the hilt with the volcano emblem. She lowered her head with its spray of fig leaves, drew the dagger to her lips. He breathed heavily: “How can you dare.” Kept still.

“Don’t leave like this, Kylin. What have I done.”

He went through the door, across the yard. Venaska at his heels: “Forgive me.” She stopped him at the foot of the mound where her house stood. He would not look at her. “Why are you following me?” Then, calmer: “There’s nothing to discuss, Venaska.”

She grabbed his hand: “Give me the dagger.” A long kiss, ardent: “May every kiss do you good, dear dagger. My kiss will soon dry: but never forget it.”

Kylin regarded the dagger. “Dear dagger,” he mocked, hugged her. They were beneath an oleander. “Don’t tremble. I want your kisses for myself. Now I know again how sweet people are. You the sweetest of all. Be calm, Venaska.” She took the fig spray from her hair, gave it him. When she reached home she sat outside weeping; women held her. Kylin stepped slowly back to the oleander, fig spray at his breast: “Blessed spot.” Gently laid the spray on the ground, touched the Earth, walked away.

East of Toulouse, on the high ground of Sidobre, at a great reunion of Iceland expeditionaries came the first cases of self-immolation. Idatto was the first to offer himself to the flames. The tender man had long kept his distance from Kylin; soulful spirits had taken him over. He could not decide to part from Kylin for good; the mark on his arm kept looking at him. And when fire crackled on Sidobre, sweetly mysterious and austere, he knew his path.

Talk of the Iceland expeditionaries spread across the landscapes. Everywhere fires could be seen, austere subduing. Precipice, as Kylin was called, stayed on Sidobre with them. The Icelanders remained on Sidobre until they felt they had

tamed the swarming spirits of the Earth. Then they looked up. The pure prostrating fires had already been carried far to the north. Settlers gathered around the glow; they subdued these dogged hard decisive people who came from the sea and strutted so grandly.

Iceland expeditionaries spread all across the southern lands. When Kylin saw the fires heading north, saw Settlers consolidating, he left Sidobre. He hitched fresh horses to his cart, steeled his innermost being, steered for the city-realms buried in the Earth.

METAMORPHOSES

NEW BEINGS emerged from the subterranean galleries where Mentusi and Kuraggara lurked. The Giants congregated with their assistants, who had to help them open the doors to the research vaults. They came through the doors as weasels, little grey darting mice. Flitted through the streets always at risk of being squashed, then scratched and squeaked again at the doors. Days later they flew as herons, big heads hanging heavy, across the plazas of the underground city, spread their wings, stretched their necks, flew up the shafts. In the laboratories they had to be turned back to humans. Then they stood there, shook themselves as if they'd been swimming, murmured, hard to regain their balance, readied themselves for another outing. They emerged from their metamorphoses duller, more aggressive. The assistants were men and shemales like them. Often when they emerged from the baths fires energy fields of the metamorphosis, perhaps still in the grip of the animal they had been, the Giants assaulted the assistants, broke lab equipment. It was hard to bring the restored humans under control. The craving to be turned into animals abated among the Giants of London and Brussels, after several of them on returning had to be beaten and hacked to pieces as the only way to put an end to their rampaging.

The fanatical Giants of London seized people in ever larger numbers, to show their power. Their bull-mad brains retained a memory of the terrible forms generated by dying shattered monsters: yeasty ferment of people animals plants chairs doors. The voyage to Greenland and Iceland was not in vain, primordial powers are in our hands, let's make good use of them.

Within two weeks the shemale Kuraggara, transformed into a bat, accomplished a dreadful deed in London. She could drool like a Greenland dragon; a drop of spit would fall on the scrap of webbing she wore around her neck – she of course was immune. At once roofbeams would begin to grow under her, iron girders smoked and melted, human arms swelled horribly thick from windows, broke the frames. The building was encased in flesh. The underground galleries were a ferment of people houses carts, doughy masses merging. Humanity had fled underground from the Greenland monsters; now here they were, hanging like a coral colony beneath the Earth. And Kuraggara, on days when she reverted to human form, rejoiced. Her fever infected Mentusi, Kara Uyuk, Shagito, Deyas Tessama. They fell on fleeing fear-crazed people in the deepest levels of London with the hum of hummingbirds, the screams of golden pheasants jays hawk-eagles, let themselves be caught, dripped the poison. The deepest part of London, Water Town, was buried beneath the onslaught of fake fluttering creatures, stones sand people iron all jumbled together. The ground collapsed, water flooded the crevices the hollows that formed.

Delvil, most powerful of all, called a halt to the fluttering monsters, killed some, fought down others who had resumed their normal shape. He threatened: "I have to strive on your behalf. On your behalf I had to send people to Iceland. The web, for you? Take care. Four of you are no longer living."

What is he up to, they cried. Grimly he made claws at their faces: fine by him if they realise what he's up to, but they should check with him first if they have it right.

He persuaded Mentusi and Kuraggara – who were still alive – to come with him to Cornwall, Dartmoor Forest. They flew on creatures of their own creation, great flat beasts in whose chest they sat, like a heart. He broke the creatures' necks: "Kuraggara, that brown one was yours. And that was yours, Mentusi. They were your little joke. You dare to show yourselves like that to my face."

Kuraggara, tall as a fir tree, had a human torso. In her last metamorphosis she had hopped about as a tree-kangaroo, her face was still brown and hairy, jaws and nose pointed to a snout, little pointed ears aiming forward from the back of her head. She squatted on plump hind legs with claws, the bushy tail curled in front. She listened drowsily to Delvil. Mentusi had the long rust-brown neck of a griffon vulture. He came down to the rocky ground by Delvil with a loud flapping of wings, raised his pointy human head, ruffled the feathers on his back, whispered, stretched his neck: "You can kill those bald things. We can make ourselves anew."

"Filthy vermin! Look at that, on your feathered collar. Guts!"

"Well spotted. Horse guts, Delvil. People were not wrong back then, to eat animals born from the bodies of other animals. They taste better to me than Meki-meals. I'll become a Settler yet." Delvil flung stones at his head. Mentusi whirred back, aired his wings, circled Delvil twice with his neck drawn in, settled down squawking.

“You, Kuraggara, standing there.” Delvil, human in form, loomed over her house-tall, grabbed her by the neck. “You’re asleep. You saw the ones I killed back in London. D’you want the same, you only have to say. Turn yourself into an ant, or a louse, I’d feel more comfortable.”

“You’re jealous, Delvil. You won’t allow us our pleasures.”

“What pleasures.”

Mentusi flapped high towards him: “Seems Delvil has become humanity’s defender at last. What do you care for humanity. I care just as much for ants and lice.”

“I don’t care for humanity, you carrion-eater.” Delvil stumbled over the rocky ground. “Humanity and me. Me caring for humanity. You take me for a prophet, a leader. I look like Marduk. That’s all past, Mentusi. They no longer trouble me. They can be Settlers or build cities or eat bark or drink sulphuric acid. Yet you lot are still scoundrels, you and Kuraggara, and Shagito and the others I killed. Play all you want. You go too far.”

Kuraggara stood tall: “That’s not true. You won’t let us do anything.”

Delvil kicked her. She sprawled into bushes under his hail of stones.

Delvil thought only of taking root here. He seldom left the moors of Cornwall. He had a few devoted helpers. He sent Deyas Tessama to Ireland, a man like himself. They would never forget Greenland and the monsters. The line of tower-humans still stood along the hills, in the sea. Delvil regarded them with fervour, with tears and loathing: “They were my friends. They stopped the monsters. We had to sacrifice them.” He went to the gloomy sad creatures. He left them to rot, they were no longer needed. They shrivelled among their rocks and timbers; the dreadful groaning, weary animal bleating echoed for months over lonely hills, the desolate watery wastes from Scotland to Scandinavia. The web-lures were buried with the shrivelling giants. Masses of rock swelled over the remains of human and beast. Down from the rafts down into the sea.

Delvil thought only of rooting in. He stayed for weeks on end in Cornwall. He brought himself on very slowly; had no wish to be cemented to the ground like the tower-humans. Let boulders tumble about inside him, water, timbers. Often his consciousness dimmed, and a long pause was necessary to ensure that the spirits of the rock would not gain the upper hand. Delvil thrust himself at London as a gigantic humanoid entity. Feet toes knees of a human, dark brown pelt for a skin. His peeling body was covered in warts boils, fronted by breasts like bay-windows, domes. A bell-shaped creature dangled from his abdomen, waved its arms. Writhing snake-bodies sprouted black and grey from his entrails, open-eyed tubes that snuggled about his legs, ate and drank for him. The chest above swelled in a slow rhythm. The snake-bodies drank whole brooks dry: they flowed through Delvil’s body. He saw Settlers running about below: “Grass-eaters. Humans. The end of humankind. The end! Eating grass! Humans!” His mournful eyes took in grass trees horses cattle. Breezes played about him. “The wind. That’s something. Hills.” He stomped in a detour around London, afraid the ground would collapse. He crossed the stormy Channel, braved the gale until it robbed him of breath. He sat down panting at Calais, made the cliffs shake. Ten Keir was hovering around Brussels; he saw the sky darken, the cloud-high stumbling giant, the grunting gurgling watery sloshing snake-hissing could be heard for miles. He fled horrified underground.

Delvil, gloomily eager, crossed back over the Channel, felt his way down to Cornwall. He swallowed rocks by the cartload. “Humans, grass-eaters. It’s the end of them.” His thoughts gloomy: must root in the earth, like a mountain. It’ll happen. Chewed crunched closed his eyes.

The Giants went hunting. Kuraggara wanted to go to Greenland. “Let’s cross the sea,” she urged brooding Mentusi with a laugh. “You come too. I’ll go hunting for marvels. You can sleep.” Mentusi flapped up: “We’ll see.”

Two vultures crossed the ocean. They flew through storms, rounded up seagulls and devoured them. The sea heaved below, a black glittering sheet. They flew down, slashed holes in whales’ heads. Storm cried: whee! They cried: whee! They broke through the wind. Icebergs, white cold glittered below. Kuraggara swept merrily through the air: “Soon be there. Mentusi, we’ve done it. There are no dragons. They’re all stuck in ice. We’ll flush them out.”

No rosy light shone about them now. A white twilight. Northern Lights flickering. Jan Mayen down there. Where was Mutumbo, who burned himself a hole in the sea, took his ships down to the sea floor. Raging waters had drowned him. The rosy light had bloomed in the sky, its steady blessing made it the lover of little stones little branches little waves, big waves. Then black thunderclouds rolled in, cyclones; these still stomped around. And then the flickering gliding clouds of flying saurians, long-necked with bony dewlaps; foxes were caught up in their feathers. A gushing spurting of creatures. The boom of bursting hulls; in a flash the vessels were engulfed by the mighty waters. Sea shimmered like oil over the vanished vessels. Jan Mayen left behind.

A chain of mountains appeared out of the sea. “There it is!” cried Mentusi, descending. It was a cluster of islands. Water foaming, a line of strong surf. White peaks, flat hilly plains. The vultures cackled, pinions stretched taut unflexing, they came slowly down. “Greenland, Mentusi!”

“Kuraggara, this is Greenland.”

Kuraggara screamed in delight: “Do you know what you forgot about, the whole flight? Hey? The dragons.”

“The dragons.”

“Yes, Mentusi. We shall take them on. Did you see one. I never saw one. Where are those sweet creatures that caused us such anguish? Where are they hiding, they’re teasing us.” She strutted, danced in the snow, her beating wings stirred up snow. “Dead, dead! Done for! Caput! Finished! Wiped out! Dragon-dead. Come, let’s look around. I’d like to play with them.”

They swept down the mountain. Everywhere deep snow, sheets of ice. They swept on a whole day under glaring

white light, the land was endless, stretched away immense and white. When the heavens spread their darkness and a blinding blizzard enveloped them, Kuraggara urged: “I see a crevice. We’ll spend the night there.” They sat weary under a cliff, slept, dreamed. They were soaring over the sea, high in the air, wings spread, not flexing, driven along.

They awoke to stabbing sunlight. Kuraggara wanted to fly on. Mentusi, ruffling his feathers, cooed: “Wait. I had a dream. I don’t want to go through snow. Where are the dragons. I dreamed they’re lying here.” At once he began to circle over the crevice. The other vulture behind him: “I see nothing.”

“They’re here. Under the snow.” They clawed into the snow of the slope, beat their wings to blow it away, scrabbled and dug. The snow lay loose, the ice was loose and crumbly, a firn, blue-white, only just formed. They pushed their warm bodies into the ice, it melted trickled away. When their claws grew tired they used their heads, bored and hammered. They spun like wheels until their talons had recovered. Then suddenly ice and snow from higher up the slope slid down and buried them. They were swept a little way down the slope, almost suffocated. Then they were decanted to the side. They found each other in air. “That you, Kuraggara?” – “Still alive, Mentusi? I can’t go on. I can’t.” They sat an hour on the plain, caught their breath. Mentusi flew up, the other flapped hesitantly after him.

Mentusi screamed, was gone. The other, frightened, flew higher higher. Saw him, the giant vulture. Clinging to a cliff, moving pecking up and down. Nervously she approached. Screamed like Mentusi. The cliff was black and brown. Snow trickled over it. Branches of a tree poked out. Sturdy branches of a broken tree lying aslant. The little avalanche had laid bare the whole face of the slope. Mentusi down there was running a strangely erratic course. Screaming and pecking. Kuraggara flew nearer.

“Look, Kuraggara. This lump here. Its not moving. Bones spine. Ribs there. Here’s the head, the eyeholes.”

“A dragon.”

“Not just one. It’s all dragons. They’re all here. It was too cold for them. They’re done for. Rained under, snowed under.” They poked away at the slope. Once it had been a forest of ground cedar, the remains lay in a cold musty bed of leaves and mosses. Ribs and piles of splintered bone lay among scree stalks leaves, ice growing in the gaps, snow water earth trickling beneath. Kuraggara screamed, flew up, swooped over the crevice. “Dragons that meant to destroy us! Dragons that laid waste to the townzones! Haha!”

Mentusi swooped beside her. “All across this land, Kuragarra. All across the land.” Swept through snow flurries icy squalls. “The whole land our flag. Our victory banner. There they are, and there, and there. Thousands, millions! Everywhere there’s white. The snow does nothing but bury them. As for us,” Mentusi hurtled up, circled. Kuraggara laughing: “As for us, they brought us their lives. Ribs in Greenland. Us alive. Ha! Let’s eat snow. Snow snow.”

They gobbled the snow that was falling on the great new continent to bury forests up over the treetops, break branches, scrape them away, scatter the animal remains that lay among them. Even the scraps of carbonised giant Tourmaline webbing that once had mastered them.

Kuraggara shrill: “So, how have you enjoyed the trip, Mentusi? I’m filling my belly with snow; it’s our friend. We’ll head home now. I had my heart set on another kind of marvel, but this will do for me.”

“And me. I wish we were home already. We have a lot to do, Kuraggara. I have an endless thirst to do things. Do, do.”

“Come. We’ll be home in a day or two.”

Mountains and icefields behind them. Atlantic Ocean crossed, meridian after meridian. Limpid water, floppy swaying pelt of the black wet monster. Cliffs and white surf: Shetland Orkney Faroes. Lines of Scottish mountains, high moors. Little flocks of sheep: humans, Settlers. Do, more to do. The vultures screamed hurtled through the air. They swept on, heads tucked in, stared avidly ahead. Miles and miles of rubble fields coast to coast; growling sea to the south. That was London. A mildew of settlements encroaching at the edges. Down into the shafts and galleries the two vultures, heads stretched, talons tucked in. They crowed.

Seeing no sign of Delvil they did as they pleased. They filled the galleries of the buried city with the howls of panthers. They multiplied themselves. Terrified people fleeing along the sloping shafts and side-galleries encountered trampling mammoths. Trunks swished up and down side to side like clubs whips hammers slings. When the trunk was flung up over the flat skull to reveal the huge red cavern of a mouth, tusks like housebeams jutting white, the beast uttered a resonant yawning roar, the sound rolled like ocean breakers over the seething crowd; they scattered. The greyblack mammoths danced. They entered the galleries. People fled up and out of the buried lairs. Now they found white light, misty sky, breezes blowing, and monsters like those from the Greenland time. Stunned, they retreated back into the Earth. Then the dreadful roaring behind them: the Giants were after them, gone berserk, their powers brought to a raving fury. Where to flee. Shafts collapsing, access to Meki factories blocked by rubble. People poured from every gap, blocking every path . They ran towards the howls of the monsters. Where the howling was must be an opening. Mentusi and Kuragarra, constantly shape-shifting, roared like a storm, delight in their throats: “Tummm! Tumm tumm!”

Then they left behind London in tumult, the turmoil of scrabbling shuddering humans. Had a thirst for Cornwall, for Delvil. Five Giants at their heels, the last that London produced. Two jumped like grasshoppers man-high, rubbed the clear glassy parchment of their wings against the back legs to shrill as they leaped. They propelled themselves high with the sharp-angled hindmost pair of limbs, spread wings, leaped over rubble heaps. The other three flew as clouds of yellow pollen. The clouds frayed and loosened sometimes, then gathered again, shot forward like a flung stone.

Delvil had just left Cornwall, was wandering on Dartmoor. A yellow cloud, humming like a swarm of flies, hung soft before his big dark eyes. He waved a hand to drive it away. It thickened, smelled of lime flowers, covered his nose

aiming for his mouth. The snakes at his belly lunged at a cloud forming at his hips. Pine trees whipped as the snakes ripped away the tops, splintered branches. The approaching shrilling grasshoppers retreated from the hail of splinters, back through the dark forest. Delvil turned his back on the clouds, sneezed wiped his eyes with a hairy arm. As he took a deep breath coughed spat – the humming came from behind close to his ears, he lowered his head – the air was split by the laughter of Mentusi and Kuraggara. Their wingbeats whooshed over the pines. They cawed; rust-brown the nearly naked necks that thrust eagerly ahead; the feathers fringing the necks were grey; they flapped through the air. Now Delvil recognised the Giants he was up against. He had been heading on his sad searching road back to the Continent. His fists brushed at his ears, his mouth, at the tickling clouds of pollen. He grabbed handfuls of the scattering cloud, crushed them in his fingers, threw them down, jabbed with his elbows at the cloud forming between his knees. It was trapped. The dust changed colour, became red, glowing. The humming now a stuttering hiss, like a steam valve. Snake-mouths spread in all directions snapping slurping at the seething cloud.

As the snake-bodies swelled turned rolled quivered flattened like worms, Delvil lifted his mane-heavy head, laid it against pine branches. Slowly he turned round. The two vultures, white heads with slack hanging wings, shoulders hunched, cawed haughtily at him from the treetops. Delvil roared: “You, Kuraggara, Mentusi! It’s you.”

Mentusi laughed: “See my hooked beak. It can rip your skin.” Kuraggara: “I’m filthy today. It’s not horse, it’s human carrion.”

Delvil gasped. His dark damp eyes stared. He said nothing for a while. Then he roared and cried: “You do this, do this. All for this. That awful war. Greenland. Dragons chased away.”

Kuraggara stretched high on her blue-grey talons. “We’re just back from Greenland. That’s why we’re so cheerful. We saw the dragons, under the ice. Now we are dragons.”

“You, Kuraggara. And you, Mentusi. Dragons. And you eat horses. You eat people.” Delvil wept. His body shook pitifully. The vultures flapped back. From Delvil’s abdomen there emerged whimpering and gently wheezing the giant coral-red polyp, the purple blooming rose: the fringes of the hundred predatory arms beat about; the arms curled back to the mouth. Suddenly, as the snakes hurled pulsing fountains of water high, rocks and chunks of wood were ejected from the choking maw of the luminous glistening looming polyp; the arms quivered, a garland of blue warts flashed like eyes behind the mouth-plate.

“I won’t live with you,” groaned Delvil. “I am not of your blood. I’m going to the Continent. Going to Marduk.” The vultures cawed: “Ha! To Marduk. You want to eat grass. We can use you, it’ll be fun.”

The forest crackled, rustled; Delvil was leaving already. “Must – to Marduk. To Marduk.” He whimpered, stumbled doggedly on. The grasshoppers had gone. The pollen cloud thicker now, dancing twitching just above the ground. Kuraggara and Mentusi screamed, gathered their courage, flapped after Delvil, landed on his shoulders, struck at the spitting snakes.

Delvil crossed the stormy Channel. He appeared on the coast green-brown in clouds, stumbling, horrifying. He stayed a whole day on the Rhine; his snakes needed this long to drink. Then he emptied his bladder in a lake. The Teutoburg Forest. He diverted around the Harz mountains. Came to the teeming Marchland – familiar country. Where was Marduk. The skyhigh droning monster stood all day on the Havel, west of Berlin. The vultures tried to bestir him. He guzzled and would not move. Once Marduk lived here. Then for hours Delvil belched rumbled cried out, until the region was emptied of people. He dropped to his knees, pressed his face to the Earth. He recognised the house where he had talked with Marduk – White Baker had been there, where was White Baker. He grasped one of the vultures by a talon: “Mentusi, Marduk’s in there. His body. I must have it.”

Reluctantly, amid Kuraggara’s jeers, Mentusi obeyed. He flapped sluggishly back to Delvil, in his talons the dangling pale body of the man who had turned the March into the bad conscience of the townzones. He had fallen to Zimbo’s rays along the Havel; had found his way into the Earth.

Delvil the Giant crouched low on his knees, head stretched forward. Thunder and summer rain fell on him. He dug Marduk’s frozen body into muddy sand, pressed down on it with his chest, squeezed into it the primordial power of Iceland. All day he wheezed groaned at the body in the ground. Until it began to stir, sand trickled, lifted, thin lines began trickling towards the body. The gaunt grey body of the Consul sprouted like a plant out of the ground. Delvil stopped pressing. With both arms he heaped sand around the naked twitching body as it grew; its head seemed fixed to its chest. Streams of soil pulsed towards the body from under Delvil’s arms. Air swirled and flashed about him. Delvil’s snakes spat water onto the ground. When the chest of the rising body began to lift arch expand – the ground around was now a deep hollow – when the fingers spread and the body tried to rise from bended knees, Delvil, grunts emerging from deep within him, a deep bass bleating, eyes rolling, withdrew his arms, stayed crouching. Marduk, thin silvery legs scrabbling in sand, came level with his neck.

Delvil’s whisper rumbled over the plain: “Marduk! Marduk!” He called more urgently: “Marduk, Marduk.” The Consul’s chin came away from the chest, the skull lifted, nose, mouth appeared. Two dark eyes stared sightlessly at Delvil’s throat. Delvil pumped the arms up and down, called. The legs scrabbled harder. “Ah” groaned the mouth as the head tried to turn. Devil waved a fist before the face, up and down. The head began to follow, up and down. Now Delvil pointed to his own mouth, his own eyes. The creature’s gaze now lifted to Delvil’s eyes, which Delvil brought close to Marduk’s, flicking left and right. At the same time insistently, one hand at Marduk’s neck: “Here, you know me. Marduk, you know me. I am Delvil.”

“Ah,” the mouth groaned more deeply, the pale lower lip drooped. Thick spittle drooled. Delvil’s voice was nervous:

“You are Marduk. Consul of the Marchland. You know me. I wanted to speak with you.” From the mouth of the creature, now following every move of Delvil’s eyes and mouth, came a prolonged “Ah”, then a resonant “What” as facial muscles quivered. Then a wheezing: “Who, who I.” Delvil tender: “You are Marduk. I fetched you back.”

“I?”

“Marduk. I fetched you back.”

“Who – Marduk?”

“You. Consul of the Marchland. We talked here many years ago. You were in that house.” The creature jerked its legs, looked down at the disturbed sand, groaned: “Leggo. My feet.”

“Keep looking at me, Marduk. You’ll know who I am. I’ll wait.”

“I – look. I – look.”

“We sat over there. This is the March, where you used to live. Now Zimbo is here. He killed you. The black man. Attend to what I say. You’ll remember. There was the Urals War, you succeeded Marke.” Now the man’s grey pale face smoothed, the lips closed, pursed. Delvil shuddered: “After Marke you came. The people you led are still alive. They are like you. You’ll be so glad. Look around you. No towns here.”

Sand scraped about Marduk, he looked down, back to Delvil’s great dark eyes, trilled: “I know. I remember.” Delvil jubilant: “You remember. The March. You lived here. No one was your equal. You were a great man.” Marduk looked up at the clouds, muttered “I know, I know,” tugged at his legs still knee deep in sand, rooted by veins nerves bone in sand. “Go. On. I must go on.”

Delvil laughed, grunted: “You’re stuck. Wait a moment, I’ll free you. I’m Delvil, I am a Giant. You are too. Of all living things it’s you I want to talk to. I yearn for you. I have to hear your voice. You will answer me.”

“I am a giant. What is that?”

“I can take my hand away now. You understand what I say. Welcome back, Marduk, my friend, my own soul. Humans are so pitiful, useless, lacking in pride. We had to go to Greenland, Marduk, we didn’t know what to do. Now the fire is with us, Marduk, the fire.” The other stood stock still, big pale grey body erect, facing Delvil still on his knees, dark eye to dark eye. Marduk’s eyes scanned Delvil’s desolate swaying frame: “Delvil’s face. I was here once. You said Marduk.”

“Keep talking, it is your voice. You remember Zimbo, you were caught by his rays. You couldn’t escape. You choked. Now you’re back.”

“With this horrible body. My knees stuck in sand. In sand. I must go.”

“Dead, Marduk. You’ve come through fire, like me. We fetched it from Iceland, no one can take it from us.”

Marduk’s chest rose, his eyes wandered to the side: “I – alive. Alive again.”

“No one can rob you of life. We have the fire, for all time, we have life for endless time. Now you see it. Marduk, what should we do?”

Marduk stared at him, teeth grinding gurgling: “What is this, what are you saying?” Delvil rose to his feet, the snakes slurped at a pool by the Havel. His head waggled in clouds, laughgrowled: “We possess fire. We possess it. Fire that can’t be extinguished. We have it. Fire that makes flowers, makes animals and people. Makes the wind and clouds. Propels gases. We have it. Marduk. It’s all in our hands. I’m not boasting; all, I tell you. I was able to make you again. Meki is nothing; we don’t need Meki. We ourselves have the primal power.” His breath steamed in the sky.

As Delvil spoke, Marduk’s face filled out, tensed. The ground stopped its steady pulsing rolling towards Marduk, clumped, lay smooth, smacked against his limbs. Marduk breathed: “So that’s it. Keep talking, Delvil. I’ve been so long not alive.”

“Not that long. We’ve made haste. Only a few decades have passed. Some dumb beasts can’t be tamed by violence or wisdom. Only by cunning, and chance. We sought and wanted nothing, we ourselves were puny. Such stupidity all around. But our luck was bigger. Volcanoes burned on Iceland, we fetched fire from the volcanoes. Didn’t know what we had. Were so proud to melt Greenland’s ice, bring the Settlers to heel. The ice melted. And then the monsters came, Marduk, hoho, monsters came upon us. You never saw them. Reptiles birds jellies every shape and form. The fire bred them. They destroyed our townzones. Crushed buildings trees people. Crushed them all, living and dead. Such mighty beings. And still we didn’t understand. All we did was be afraid. Afraid, Marduk, day in day out. We crept below the ground. Abandoned the coasts, because the calamity came from over the ocean. Until we saw the claws on the cat, Marduk. Do you know what we did with the claws? Did we cut them off? No, we left them on the cat and made new ones for ourselves, longer sharper. Look at me. Look at yourself.”

“I hear you, Delvil. I know you. Ah, the March. See the lakes there. Havel. Here’s where I choked to death. Now my body is alive again.”

The monster Delvil slowly cautiously felt his way to a kneeling position: “Now, think, what do I want with you here on the Havel, why have I come. See those things flying around behind you?”

“Vultures.”

“Yes, vultures, griffon vultures. Mentusi and Kuraggara. They’re pecking at your legs. They’d rather see you dead. They love their curved beaks. How they snicker at us. And these are my companions. Giants like me, male and shemale. This is what they do, for fun. And that – that is what’s become of us, Marduk! Of us lords of mankind! We created the devices that steered humanity. They don’t know right from left. Storming off to Greenland. London in ruins. Brussels demolished. They have their fun. But I –” How Delvil gasped, how he raised imploring arms to Marduk’s thin feeble

trembling body. He did not see how Marduk was weakening, how he tugged to free his feet from the soil; in the face the sharp features of the old first Marduk appeared, like a light, a fire appearing behind a paper screen that tries to hide it.

"I am Delvil. A lord of mankind. I know what's within my grasp. It came to me. Don't think it's my companions, I have none, Marduk! I have a duty. So do you. I don't want vengeance."

"Glad to hear it, Delvil."

Delvil emitted a forlorn sob: "Don't mistake me, Marduk. You look different now from when I came to you that time. You are not something born of woman. I have more than devices behind me. Look at you, at me. You can't speak now as you once did in your Council House. We have a duty. The fire has come down to us."

"Things have their will, I have mine. Flee from your fire, Delvil, tear Earth apart."

"I am no Kuraggara."

"Tear it apart. What else is there."

"I don't want to tear Earth apart."

"Ah. Don't want. Delvil comes to Marduk: he does not want what the devices and the powers want. Has something happened to Delvil. He woke Marduk up. Something happened. Did you know you were waking Marduk?"

"But this is you."

"And did you know the answer Marduk would give you. Who says A must say B. You need me, Delvil. You are punier than I, you are done for. Helpless. Defeated by Marduk."

Delvil's groans grew louder: "Don't misunderstand me. There are grass-eaters, people, Settlers who talk about you. You don't mean it. Eat grass like calves, you didn't intend this, you can't want it now. What I have you have. You share the burden."

"I feel no burden. Why do you crawl before me, dig me from my grave. You must have come from England, you and your groaning. How are you better than Kuraggara."

"Yes, mock me, scold me."

"You grab at me, fetch me back – you never dared while I lived. You failed. You're failing now. Go away. Fetch dead people, Pharaohs, hyenas. Blow on your fire until it consumes you."

Night came. Marduk's body glowed. Light as from a pale moon radiated from his mouth, his eyes, his fingers, danced vertically about him. Delvil on all fours before him, touching him, crawling around him; he made no comment on the light, was racked by longing terror bitterness. The snakes, unsettled, sprayed water on his heated body; the red chewing medusa squeezing crackling snapping, after a wheezing pause. Delvil grubbed fearfully at the ground, swept hillocks aside; pines crackled as they fell. His face, taut with a yearning realisation, came within Marduk's glow. The hollow he stood in was now at rest. His legs still tugged at the soil, were free to the ankles. He breathed heavily, mouth wide open, head thrown back; his arms rowed the air. "So. I can. Earth air eyes; close eyes. Someone fetched me. Marduk, refuse their call. It is over. Scattering. Sweet bodies scattered. Away now."

Delvil tried to bring his steaming chest, girded round with its primordial power, closer to Marduk, to place his hands on Marduk's shoulders. Could not. His chest felt heavy, the hands were forced back. Hands paralysed. And the arms, as if poisoned.

Marduk shrilled, slurped air: "Not in this guise. Marduk, be off! Away, Marduk!" The vultures flapped down crowing onto Delvil's prostrate back. Gasping, groaning he dragged himself avidly towards the softly cooing moonglow figure, its song "Marduk Marduk". Light streamed from it, long rays across the landscape. Denser matter floated undulated from the figure, covered Delvil's face and back, touched trees and black broken ground, wafted about the flapping vultures. "Marduk" the figure sang in a monotone, seethed sprayed began to spin, sparks flew. In rage and horror Delvil tried to grab at it, howled when the creature glided away with a high-pitched hum, slid across the ground. It was hardly human now, this gliding sliding thing, a pool a vapour spreading ever wider, at its core something human-like, dissolving.

Tumbling thundering after it, Delvil roared: "Here, you two! Mentusi, help me. Kuraggara, see him there. Grab his neck. The feet, get on with it." Into black high air the vultures rose, talons splayed, dropped blindly to the apparition on slackly folded wings, tumbled through nothingness, crashed into pines. "Grab him," Delvil raged, standing now, he lurched forward grabbing, stumbled on heavy legs.

The apparition was dissolving away, a sheen of silvery scales hard to spot in the pervasive white glow. The glow shone on dazed Mentusi and Kuraggara bumping dropping from the splintered pinetops. Delvil's snakes dangled slack, the red medusa poked wobbling from his body, mouth gaping, its rubbery lining everted. Delvil felt a pain, his body was being torn apart. He went numbed into the white sea of mist. The dazed vultures swayed with the trees; the medusa tore at his entrails. He bent down, hauled the medusa onto his arm, stumbled, stared from the mist back to the west.

Screamed his rage to the black sky. Back across the Havel he made a stop, pulled himself together. It was unthinkable, what had happened. At his chest was the web that had awoken Marduk. He turned back east, his hips were failing, he lurched sideways. As the white glimmer came closer, the medusa stiffened on timid arms as if to seize something, coiled jerked back. The milky white mist floated over the Havel plain. Trees below it swayed gently in the breeze, hidden birds set up a dreamy twittering. People asleep in houses huts barns. Adults stretched, and in their dreams walked through an open warm landscape, lured on by a pale apparition. Children in straw kept their eyes shut, the mouth twitched, they laughed. Delvil himself, his entrails on fire with pain, felt a lethargy as he lurched and snapped at air. Sweet paralysis. Distant thoughts played through the blood-swollen cloud-high head: people, summer strolls, a pond with goldfish. His knees wanted to fold. And as he struggled, head back, to drink in air, he collapsed. Unbearable lashing

pain. It drove him to his feet again. West, west. He roused the vultures. Stormed through Hannover. On the Rhine he regained control of himself. Screamed for two days.

The vultures swept west, came back confused and angry. They perched on his head as he crossed the Channel. “Mentusi, Kuraggara, what use is my web, this power. Has it won?”

“It’s escaped. We’ll find it again.”

“I don’t want to. On to Cornwall! I’ll assault the Earth. I will. Did you see him, how he rose in light. I’ll tear Earth apart.”

Kuraggara screaming: “The Earth, all of it. People too. And rocks and seas.” In Cornwall Delvil stood for weeks roaring, wept: “He was right. I’ll tear Earth apart.”

The Giants learned from Mentusi what had happened. Delvil growled in despair: “Everything we have, here to me.” And in a tumult of destruction the vultures and Delvil’s helpers stormed into nearby continental cities they had not yet ravaged. Laid waste to Meki factories. Any scraps of Tourmaline webbing they came across they carried away. Piled them around groaning Delvil on his moor.

Then they reverted to their original forms. Cast off vulture feathers. On Dartmoor Delvil began to grow. To the west, on Bodmin Moor, Mentusi. North on the River Taw, Kuraggara. They formed a wide arc open to the north. There was room for the other Giants. Mountains of webbing piled around them. “Should I make a Greenland,” scoffed Mentusi, “shall we hang the webs over the Earth and turn it all to clinker. Shall I send the sea over Europe. Shall we bring the Poles to the Equator.”

Delvil clunked: “Northward. Aim all our power northward. We’re on our way. Keep the power close so you’re not brought down.” Kuraggara, growing from a hill on the Taw: “And when the Earth is torn apart, I’ll just sail through the air.” Delvil: “Grow! Suck the Earth into you. Take what you can on the voyage. To the north.”

In bitter loathing the Giants directed north the dreadful force of all their power, to the sea from which the reptiles and webs had come. “I’m sending them all back,” Delvil screamed.

LYON BURNING

ACROSS EVERY landscape, on every continent and island, among trees blooming and fading, among snuffling loping beasts hungry and sated, there moved dying humans. Felt their arms that still could grip, imbibed the juices that welled to them from the Earth. And then they shrivelled. Aged weakened, turned grey. Sinister forces were at work in them. They had known only proud insistent burgeoning urges; now they wept. Rivers flowed as always, mountains and their forests stood peaceful, the yellow sun came up with the day, the blue and black of the sky had not changed: only *they* were fading, being brushed away.

They began silently to paint themselves. Grey lines were drawn around eyes, lips were made blue and pale. A chisel was digging into the face, undercutting the cheekbone, jutting it forward over slack cheeks. Eyes gently sunken walled themselves in, retracted coldly.

Beneath the surface, activity was pushing the nose askew, incising grooves across the nostrils. Eating and drinking did nothing to stopp it. The slender noseridge became a broad path with rigid sides and holes that were dark damp gorges. Skin once downy was pulled thin as paper over the face, taut over the face, clung like a mask; people looked out miserable and helpless from a mask. They were undergoing demolition, a building razed to the ground. They felt it, remained silent. And jaws snapped, chewed bread, tore at meat, acted as if they knew nothing, and below the body dried out, hardened. Thin gristly ears turned yellow, sprouted clumps of stiff hair. The mouth was laid bare, lips horribly folded, lips, those pale red moist ribbons. Boils erupted from neck to chin, tightened with every move of the mouth. Hands bony, gnarled fingers shaking. And the people sat listlessly, moved listlessly, endured. Until the end came, brushed by hardly noticed, Death over the liver, over the heart, the testicles, the cancer-ravaged womb. A hardened blood vessel bursting in the dried-up brain. A twitch, eyes rolled, it lay still; was a human once.

People who had survived Iceland moved down from the heights of Sidobre near Toulouse. Among them Kylin, Hoyet Sala, the Precipice. From Toulouse, where once again she marvelled at the cathedral of Saint Sernin, dusky smooth-skinned Venaska came to meet them, asked if she might walk with them. On the path through a field of maze he stared hard at her: “You really want this, Venaska?”

“Let me come with you.”

“I left your fig spray beneath the oleander tree.”

“Hoyet Sala, here’s another.”

“I accepted your kisses beneath the oleander tree. I know how sweet people are.”

“Take me. I want you to love me.” And as it travelled warmly through him, he hummed: I’ll take her along. I’ll go wandering with her. Looked dreamily at his hand, buried the thought.

They travelled by goat-cart through the blooming plain of the Garonne, headed east. Settlers and expeditionaries encountered them in fields of rye, in dense clumps of trees, the calm leaf-strewing beings newly greening. Any Iceland expeditionary was allowed to join them; Precipice looked away as Venaska as usual decked these men and women out in young leaves. Every day they flinched from fires that burned in the fields. Venaska rose from their prayers dreamily, with sleepy little eyes. Precipice, ever hard and grim, pushed on east, to the Rhone; he wanted to go up the Rhone valley to Lyon, farther north. They climbed through empty rocky valleys, spates and waterfalls on every side. Across the great river lay a plain.

Now people from the north came in great numbers towards them. Precipice sent men to mingle with the migrant groups; they refused to call a halt. People headed west, across the river. They searched around in the hills, asked about hideouts. And then the people around Kylin – they were quite close to the Lyon townzone – heard crackling screaming all day and night. Smoke from fires, dreadful flames above Lyon. Throngs of weeping exhausted people, pale and dark-skinned, came fleeing out of the din.

Three Giants had occupied Lyon, two shemales and a man – the other lords of mankind were dead. These planned to turn themselves into vapour-clouds and go to Delvil. Their rugged bodies, nourished on rocks and soil, withstood the flames. They had set the whole Rhone valley ablaze, were firing more forests. The townzone was burning from deep below. The she-mountain Tafunda stood legs straddled over the flames licking at her feet, pissed into the fire, quivered at the others: come help; but she was not consumed. One lay over the ancient outlying town of Macon like a blue silk mountain. His body no longer recognisable; fire gnawed at him, the Giant fought with the flames that sought to destroy him, waft him away. He clung with all his might to his writhing streaking body; the fire broiled and roasted, he couldn't feel it; let the fire do what it will. He hardly breathed, had yielded up all his moisture; still the wind could not shift the blue bulk.

Then the third Giant, the shemale Kussussa, poked her head out of the incandescent burning pit that was Lyon: "We have time? Some fires these!" With a mad laugh she tore her Giant's armour, the Iceland webbing, from her chest, squeezed it, rubbed it on a cliff beside the river. Crack! Green jets of fire. Her body crackled away over the clouds. The blast of heat blew the Giant at Macon free of the ground to soar like a blue creature of the air. He stretched mollusc arms to Tafunda, who snapped and smouldered at him but could not burn. He dragged the writhing groaning monster along with him.

Kylin stood transfixed on Mount Pilate. They saw the Giant from Macon circle overhead with the black writhing figure and head off northwest. They wanted to go down into the valley; were deterred by the repellent stinking smoke. The stream of humanity had suddenly come to a stop. And as they crossed the last hill to the east, the entire train of expeditionaries halted. The valley was now a wide swamp, Giants' footprints, hills levelled in the Giants' assault, mountains to the northwest had tumbled into the valley. Rubble of buildings all across the plain, smoking. People animals trudging. The assault and the fires had overwhelmed every settlement. Fire had fallen on fleeing creatures like an erupting volcano. They lay, black-brown specks curled on the paths, in heaps where walls had blocked their way.

On the eastern hills, as smoke drifted up the slopes many expeditionaries flung themselves flat, tried howling trembling to hide in the ground; clapped hands over ears: the ghosts of Greenland and the volcanoes had pursued them here. Most were stunned; plodded doggedly on. Kylin mingled, his face cold, laughed, sometimes burst out: "They caused their own destruction! The Giants, damn their faces. Damn the hands we helped to give them. If only I could tear them to pieces as easily as I made them." Sobbing yammering he raised his hands: "I can't take any more of this. Fire, of you I can think. Fires on Iceland, in the sky, fire in my body, away with them all. Burn them to ashes, beat them down. No more punishment. See how we suffer."

He wept out loud with the rest. He led them down from the hills to the valley. No avoiding the burned the mangled, the horribly crushed. "Let no one say," lamented Kylin, "that a human is the same as a tree, a stick, a heap of sand. A human is not the same as air and stones. Stones have been shattered, mountains trodden down by the Giants; the trees they trampled cry out to me. But to see this: these people. Look well: these were people. More than muscle and bones and skin. The Giants couldn't see it. I myself did not see it. They were alive. They are gone." Around him they wept: "We want to go from here. Must we pass through this vale of woe?"

"We must." Precipice pale, red blotches on brow and cheeks. "There can never be too much of this. This is the fire that was prepared for us. Come behind me. Bend, melt, be shattered. It's no shame. Look back: what is it there, vanishing to the northwest? Crowing in triumph, soon it will rage. Well, well. Our shame. No harm if it shatters us. All of us." Sobbed, clenched his fists, eyes narrowed: "Destroy them, whoever they are. Fire, destroy, make them vanish in the air. Turn them to dust. Leave nothing behind."

And on they went through the dreadful valley, until a raft came over from the eastern bank with a throng of distraught crazed dumbstruck people. Then they climbed aboard the raft, crossed the smoke-veiled river to the other shore. As they crossed, Kylin nagged them: "This is water. Look at it. There's nothing to cry about. You can drown here. When you've done enough burning, you can drown. And be gone from the Earth."

Horrors without end awaited them on the wide expanse of the eastern bank. Kylin shaken, insatiable to see more, show them more. He dragged them to the lip of the yawning crater of the buried Lyon townzone, out of which the ghastly laughing Giant had crawled. Kylin taunted cruelly: "Or you can jump down there. They couldn't burn it to ashes, it'll do for us."

For days they failed to draw Kylin away from the dreadful plain of the dead. Several had already fallen sick. Hard

Kylin glared at them in loathing and satisfaction. He heard with shining eyes that some had run away crazed with disgust, others could not bear the load of torment. “We must stay, must see who’ll be last.” They implored him: “You want to sacrifice us. We have other plans.”

“Nothing better for us than burning. We must do as the Giants did. Fly to London as a cloud.”

As they were casting about one evening for dogs, now their main source of food, Kylin came across Venaska, who had been going about veiled and small to avoid him. He pulled her veil away: “Ah, Venaska. Good to see you. You’ve been hiding from me. Here with us on the Rhone, Venaska! I haven’t been thinking of you.”

“Hoyet Sala. I’ve been around. You allowed me to join you.”

He kept hold of the veil. “Venaska, I don’t believe it. Venaska from the Garonne, the Loire. You tie a veil around your face, your eyes twinkle. You should close your eyes, hold your nose.”

“Hoyet Sala, what are you saying. Give back my veil.”

“No. For just this moment you should look and listen.”

“I always look and listen. I was hiding. From the sight of you. You’ve grown so terrible.”

“She’s suffering. Venaska’s suffering. Because of me. There’s no need. Aren’t you ashamed to talk so. Say sweet nothings to me; your handiwork can bloom here too. The oleanders the fig trees of Provence – don’t you think, they’re nothing compared to this. It’s nice here. Down there by your foot, stinking, that’s the body and bowels of a man, or a woman, I can’t tell from here. And lying across it, the two legs of a child. But there’s no child. Venaska, what can you say about this child. Isn’t a child’s nimbleness something to marvel at? The child’s legs were too slow, but the child – is with who perhaps? Running with the Giants, body arms head, hurrah hurrah. Hupp! Now gazing from a Giant’s toe down at the sea, maybe London already. A funny kid full of curiosity. A genius, and died so young! Why don’t you interrupt me, Venaska, with exclamations of joy, or a song? You have the throat for it. Tears, tears. Onwards.”

“Why do you rage at me? Why insult me?”

“To me you’re just a speck of colour in the landscape. No, Venaska, it’s right that you creep about, the veil is good. You’re cursed, don’t you see. Yes, you. You probably don’t know what it means to be cursed. Look at that mess of guts, the child’s legs stuck to it, they were people, they were me, me.”

“Not me, I didn’t trample them. Stop, Hoyet Sala. Don’t you see who you’re speaking to.”

“I speak so because I don’t see you. You dare to be here. At the graveyard of all human dignity, you the song of triumph, dragging our shame before our eyes, feasting on our shame.”

She pressed close, he sank to his knees under the force of her embrace. Her lips quivered, her eyes glowed. She tried to kiss his mouth. “Would I have followed you if what you say is true, Hoyet Sala?”

He groaned, offered no resistance. “Pooh! Embracing! More! Kissing, tumbling, your loins with mine. It’s good. You like it when I say I don’t know you? Show me what I am, all of it.”

“I weep with you. I do nothing to hurt you. Don’t bury yourself, Hoyet Sala.”

“Hold me, Venaska. Nothing else can help.” He flung himself prostrate on the ground, cooed: “I had to kiss the muddy ground. I had to journey from Iceland to Lyon to be exposed by you. To see my shame in its entirety. Your lap, here. All our human shame.” She tugged at his arm. He stood up, deathly pale, snarled: “Come with me, Venaska.” He hauled her along for two days through the ghastly valley, watched her suffer. Then he could stand it no longer. She had not changed, her eyes sat in almost green hollows, she was still gentle. Then he paced around the crater of the smoking subterranean city, closer and closer. He seemed only slowly to understand what he wanted. He pulled her to one of the fissures venting gases of decomposition: “Smell it with me, Venaska. This is the bath we take before our wedding. What are you?” She wrestled with him, distraught. “I’m no different from you.” She trembled wailed.

“Don’t wail, Venaska. You’re no different from me. Show me.”

“I will not do what you ask.”

“But you will, Venaska. You’re like me. You are my life. If only you weren’t so lovely, so sweet. Go away. Go down. What difference does it make. None of ours are there.”

“I won’t go down.”

“Don’t upset me, Venaska. Don’t make me cross. Don’t mock me with love. I don’t need to atone. Atone forever and ever. I’ll die in this stink. An end to it.”

“You dragged me here. You mean to throw me in.”

“No. You’ll do it yourself. You can do it. Do it, if your eyes are opened.”

“I will not. I’ll stay with you, Hoyet Sala. Now more than ever. You’ll feel remorse for me.”

“I don’t want you. Don’t speak to me. I know you. Ghastly. You – you’re the same species as the Giants. You’re the last. You too are a monster flung out from Greenland. You live in me, horribly: my oblivion. Let oblivion take you. I am the Precipice.”

She whimpered: “I’m ashamed. How you insult me. Sweet Earth, take me.” Venaska fluttered in the smoke billowing from the fissure, stroked the ground in her gentle way. She crawled off out of Hoyet Sala’s sight, left him seething behind her.

That same day the expeditionaries left the valley of the Rhone. Precipice was incandescent in front of the others: “Venaska is gone. I knew what she was. We are human. She wasn’t. I knew her. She was the same as those reptiles and Giants.”

When they lamented: “Groan, all of you. Bring on the grief. The grief. We need pitchers for it, gallons every day. For

us humans only Hell will do. Without fire we'll just be stone. Hell is all we need. Grief is our soul, our god." Then softly: "You know, she went into the fire and was a part of me. Blessed, whoever grants humiliation."

IN CORNWALL

VENASKA, sweet woman, fled west. Left behind the smoke and stinking gases of the Lyon crater. She was frightened, alone. Often she wept. She was the delight of the traumatised people she moved among, to whom she gave her dusky hands. Where am I going. Where do I want to go. I belong to the Greenland creatures, so Precipice said. She wanted to go to them, to Greenland. And then in the west she came among desperate starving often cannibal hordes fleeing Orleans and Paris. They spoke of the Giants gathering in Cornwall. To the Giants: that's my goal. A deep unconscious desire seized hold of her, swamped her; she lusted for the Giants. Hoyet Sala had railed against them: they were of her blood. Suddenly she felt certain of it. She no longer understood the laments the howling of the hordes, the hoarse profanities directed at the rampaging Giants. Her own despair evaporated, like the night when rosy morning dawns. Why do they groan and shout. What are their names, those Giants so far away. There they stand in Cornwall, ghastly their deeds, horrible their bodies. But no one knows them. I alone know them in all their deeds and bodies: my blood, my brothers.

"My brothers, my dear brothers," sighed day and night in her. She gazed sweetly at the landscape of the Loire. "Here I am again, little streams, lovely birches, sweet grass. So long since I saw you last. I was under a spell." She stepped naked into a stream. "Lovely water, this is my body. It's all yours. I'm heading north. Help me to cross." She stood pale on the sloping bank, let the breeze dry her. "You are cool, lovely wind. This is my body, my breasts. Help me cross to England." Warm sunlight came: "Ah, sun. What need for eyes and ears. I feel you through my skin, on my back, my neck, my feet. You come with me on my wanderings."

She journeyed with people that she charmed, long days up to the Seine. Then no one wanted to come with her; fear of the Giants was too great. She laughed, went on full of longing: "Go then. They're not your Giants." She went down the Seine, across meadows, through scrub. She was happy, so full of longing. The landscape clung to her. The faster she moved, the more the beings of the landscape held her tight. Grass tangled in her shoes, she had to take them off and go barefoot. At night, trees she slept among moved to block her path. On, on she went. Scrub, grass went with her. Chestnut trees, limes in their summer bloom perked up at her approach. They huffed clouds of pollen dust, then lowered their tops, branches tried to snag her hair. She giggled, cooed at them: "Oh you! I must come to Cornwall. Leave my hair alone. Help me come to Cornwall, I must come to the Giants, my brothers." No sea yet, still no sea. She fretted, cried. Thick grass hemmed her in. Venaska was happy in her love, and sobbed with longing. As she wearied, one foot in front of the other, enclosed by the land, she stretched her arms out to the north. Tears started in her eyes. The tears sped ahead of Venaska, landed on the shoulders of the Giants.

There they stood in Cornwall, dumb mountains, Giants in an arc from Bodmin Moor to Exmoor further north. They had hollowed out the Earth around them, sucked in huge quantities of soil and water. They grubbed with prisms of ore in deep gabbro bedrock. Their feet were criss-crossed with narrow green veins of hornblende, black-brown olivine streaked with iron climbed up to the chest, a stony overcoat. At the chest they wore the radiant webs. Each impassive green-black fissured water-ravaged face pointed northwest towards the sea, to rip out the sea, melt its floor, let flaming lava pour forth and shake the land. All their jubilant savagery was gone. The currents of the mountains surged through them. The Earth lamed them, tried to overcome them. They had to fight with all their soul's strength not to yield.

The seas, those green water-folk, had long since flooded from Cardigan Bay over Wales, raged into the Bristol Channel, foamed to the feet of stony Kuraggara. The huge whipped-up furious surge rolled in day and night from the Atlantic. Ireland was inundated from coast to coast. The flood loomed raging down from the north, drove a miles-wide path roofed with thunderstorms, crashed against Cornwall. Beyond the Hebrides the waves dissolved, released yawning clouds of vapour. New masses came, boiled, filled the gaps. Week by week the surf-crashing battle-line grew brighter from some invisible source. Lightning flashed continuously through glimmer and shadow. Endless gouts of rain, rumbling thunder.

In Cornwall, drawing the Earth into their bodies, sucking in whole rivers, the Giants struggled to remain conscious. Their basso grunting wheezing merged with the rumbling thunder. Consciousness tried to slip away. When one groaned the others joined in, to rouse it with their noise. Delvil, all the forests of Dartmoor on his back, could move only his eyelids. Trunks of fir and pine washing loose through his veins poked through the smoke-black skin. To the rocks floating in him he was a hopper; they rose clogging to his throat. They pushed their edges out at his shoulders, chest; were slopes, clefts where gushing water gathered.

And in the storm, as he stood there – what did he think about, want to remember – a pain burned his neck. He paid it no heed, his forested pond-heavy head sank lower. Then his finger twitched, the arm bent, a burning in the neck; such pain. He felt around. Something calling. From where. He mumbled. Venaska's tears smacked into his shoulders, his

throat. A call: Delvil Delvil Delvil. The thought came over him: it's calling my name. Delvil Delvil. The call and the tears were linked. His fingers felt: they're hot. Through the storm the cry came to his shoulder: "Delvil. Help me. I'm tangled in grass. I want to come to you." She calls me by name. Always the name. The name. It's like when Marduk vanished. He pondered, alert now, groaned: "I must keep hold of the webs." Tears gathered tickling burning behind his ears. This calling: the others don't hear it. Arms up to his mouth. Arms over his eyes. He pulled his head back gasping; fear stabbed through him.

"Delvil, I can't come to you. Why do you stand there. Pick me up, dear brother."

"Oh!" he braced himself, gave a hollow grunt: "Go away," and groaned along with the others: "It's the stones, stones and brooks. They're taking my consciousness away." Thunderstorm rattled, blackness, sudden glare. He squeezed the webbing.

"My arms are holding you. They're glad to be with you. I shall come soon, nothing can hold me back. You're my blood. I yearn for you. Yearn, Delvil."

It licked twitching through his brain, induced him to tug at his legs. What is this hanging at my chest; what dead corpses are these my legs. "You won't befuddle me. The sea is coming. We're tearing the Earth apart."

"My blood, you; you yearn for me. I know you, though you deny me. My mouth is with you. There. My dead brother, behold the sea, so beautiful. You feel me, feel everything. You are forest mountain river. See the sweet life in you. Our sweet life, forest river mountains. Let them come to you. Just let them come."

Consciousness slipping from him: "I must groan. They must groan with me. They must waken me."

"My heart is coming to you. It's there now. Dead brother, look around. Now you can live."

His head jerked violently back. Through the blackness, the flashing, a bleeding dripping figure was coming near. Glowing, veins pulsing, Venaska's heart came slowly silently on. Sank into the mountain: for seconds warmth streamed in. Soft darkness bubbled ground-deep into Delvil.

"Why not, Delvil. Why not." His head was no longer there, the raging sea was dimmed.

"Dead brother, now we are both well. Now I have you. Stretch out. You have legs, sink down. Down, down. We're sinking. Ah so good to sink down." It was no longer Delvil stretched out there in mountain lake forest, flowing apart. No longer Delvil.

And Venaska swelled towards the other Giants, from Bodmin Moor to Exmoor on the Bristol Channel. Embedded in masses of syenite they struggled with green seeping veins of augite coursing through it, sandstone scattering on their heads, swathes of stony rubble piling up in their veins. Forest brooks welled cool against them, springs gushed through them. They twitched, their lips tried to pout. Pleading singing behind the ear. Touchings at throat and fingers. In their astonishment, as they began to wheeze, to rouse themselves, they felt the most profound bliss, the mouth hung open. Thoughts fled like smoke. A dream flared blinding bright: they were being called by name, Kuraggara, Tafunda, Mentusi. Tears dripping down the neck, voice cooing. Who is it. Warm. Dripping. Shockingly gentle sweet voice: Kuraggara, Tafunda, Mentusi. Is this Death. Ah the things the world holds.

They were no longer Giants, disintegrating into forests mountains. The thundering rearing sea sprayed high, washed these crags away: they tumbled, loose tree trunks, little stones; the webs. Webs rubbed against rocks, blew them to smithereens. Then the black coursing sea retreated. The thousand-armed waters sank back into Cardigan Bay. The mist over the sea cleared. Ireland rose again, water pouring from its back. The Giants' stony heads and arms rolled crashing onto Cornwall.

AFTER THE STORM

FROM HOLES and lairs in the devastated cities they crept, traumatised. They had no food; loathing and cannibalism ruled. Tight-knit hordes came from the rumbling British Isles, remnants from the Irish flood, they swept killing plundering through western Europe. Meki factories lay ruined; fields tended by Settlers were few. Like a cloudburst, a calamitous hailstorm, people who had been spared the Giants' trampling stormed across the land. They rampaged for months, left behind corpse-littered landscapes. Anything strong enough dug itself in among desolate forests, fields, some alone, most in bands ready to fight. They ate whatever came to them, were hard as bone, hunted game. The first wave in this emptying and inundation of the European continent, this monstrous calamity, was over in a year. For a lot longer the masses continued to be pushed and pulled, forced here and there, more inundations, more emptyings.

The Iceland expeditionaries were best able to resist the first wave. They met the terrible hordes with no lesser ferocity. Toiled as if harvesting volcanoes. Held back brutish bands, fragmented them, forced others on. Turned up armed and maintaining good contact in Belgian lands, on the Seine, the middle Loire, the Rhone. They had to erect a formidable barrier to save from destruction the happy landscapes south of the Garonne. They smuggled to Calais Le Havre Antwerp, to the mouth of the Gironde vessels from the Greenland venture that lay rusting in northern harbours, sent masses away

in them to the wide forgotten landscapes of Africa, to North and South America.

As in the Urals War, when colliding fire-lines drove hordes down to the Black Sea, the destruction of the Danish and Scandinavian townzones sent floods of terrified starving dying people around the Baltic. The southern coastline, to Lithuania in the east down to the Rhine in the west, had been settled by Marchers in a fertile well-tended landscape. Now black Consul Zimbo met his end, when he tried to use the moment to extend Marcher power by attacking north and west. Sturdy armed farmers struck him down at a meeting in Berlin, opened the borders, took in hordes of refugees. Marcher aid workers crossed the Rhine. The later western population owed its perpetuation mostly to them. They guided throngs of northern refugees through their own region, across the Warthe, the Vistula. These entered the Russian Plain, now smooth and calm again after the war of flames. The mingled remnants of the zones were taken in by Mongol and Siberian nomads. In the whole of Europe, of those who had been enticed and tricked to live in the zones there remained only the descendants of the older harder white and dark-skinned people. Survivors from later influxes ebbed back south. It was now thinly settled, this land that had sprouted the mighty zones, mothers of the Giants. Most were descendants of mixed-race people with Amerindian ancestry, and recently immigrated sturdy Mestizos; only scattered remnants of Whites.

Then the hurricane abated. On the European continent, humans toiled urgently with furious energy to regain the land. America had thrown up no figures like Delvil Tafunda Kuraggara. Earlier than in Europe its townzones had dissolved, its senates disappeared, devices and science decayed. When the eastern components of the former Communal League splintered and fell apart, a multitude of small contented townships endured in the ruins of the monstrous old cities of the Americas, now reclaimed by mountain and grassy plain. In Europe people came together in village communities, often located close to the ruins of the old townzones. Not long after, there came raids by robber bands from Africa, for whom the northern continent had not lost its allure. The raids led to counter-measures, to the firming of tribal and group identities, expansion across the Mediterranean.

The events in Cornwall sent dust clouds across northern Europe, as if from a volcanic eruption. Rain poured down for weeks. Amid the calamities and deadly fury of those days no one gave it a thought. And anyone still alive who thought of the Giants had no fear of them; had now no fear of anything. Only when the struggle was over did people remember the raging Giants. And they saw the hard expeditionaries in their leather clothing riding through the land at the head of little bands of purposeful migrants, repairing footpaths, clearing main roads, splitting up any too-big migrant hordes. In Belgium and on the Rhine rumours arose: these are men and women of the old ruling clans, they rebelled against the senates, made themselves masters of monstrous powers in Iceland and Greenland, on the British Isles they fought Giants to the death. They are men and women like Marduk and White Baker, only stronger. They beat the Giants with their own weapons. The expeditionaries had no way to counter these rumours. They were too reticent, you could see the volcano brand and how humble they were in the presence of fire. That must be the power; it held even them down. Would they try to lord it over everyone like the old rulers. And though still on their guard, people began to emulate the expeditionaries, to worship fire so as be on the same footing as them and, of course, so as not to affront a great unknown power. To the expeditionaries themselves who settled among them they showed respect, knelt before Hoyet Sala.

Austere Marcher customs spread west and south, now that the time of isolation was over. At the same time, like winged seeds there spread among former zone-dwellers in the fields, among the ruins, a grave loving reverential ethos of the south. People felt their way anew into thunder, into rain, the soil, the motion of sun and stars. They drew near to tender plants, to animals. Like the metal bulls after the Urals War, the fires of the Icelanders dotted the landscape as memorials to the catastrophe. But people prayed joyfully and with an easy breath before their flickering light, the great powers that had saved everyone and now gave new life to them all. In many regions symbols of animals, carved idols appeared. People worshipped them, placed themselves under their protection. Every moment was rife with mysterious powers; there was a very lively belief in ghosts.

MEMORIALS

HOYET SALA was caught in a bad dream: he was wandering by the Seine; someone had come before him across these wide levels, past these swaying trees: Venaska. He had to go on, had to find her. A thicket came. He tried to go in, go through. Could not. He tried and tried. And as he charged at the thicket he was suddenly lifted up, up and over the dense scrub. Over the broad sweet yearning longed-for levels he flew. He twisted about, he was flying. Had to fly across the roaring sea, the Channel, high in the high black air. He opened his mouth: “Soon be there.” And there was the black desolation: Cornwall. His arms flapped like ribbons before him. He descended onto rocky Dartmoor. Sank onto clattering stone. His body became rooted in the hill, he was a Giant, a big dead crag.

Hoyet Sala awoke from the dream trembling from head to toe. He roamed around the landscapes being opened up by settlers who let the breath of pine-beings and green beech trees wash over them. He went north, to the plain where Brussels had once stood above ground. Ten Keir sat there.

“Ten Keir, I’ve been looking for you. Come down from the ruins. All you have left is skin and bones. Join us. We came from Iceland and Greenland, you know it. We were all saved.”

“Why do you speak to me, why come to me, Hoyet Sala. Enough have been burned by you. Why bother me. Aren’t you afraid I’ll burn you and you’ll bear my symbol?”

“What symbol?”

“Ah, you think you’ve won and I shall die in my empty crushed city. But there’s nothing about me to be saved. I shall not be bowed. There’s no god and no power whose symbol I accept. I am a man. And you, Hoyet Sala, are not.”

“Really, Ten Keir?”

“Really. Else you’d be sitting like me. You’d be mourning the long-gone Giants.”

“The Giants. A good thing for us that they’re gone.”

“What are you saying, you pious believer, you saint. They are gone. Died a monstrous death. I’ve no idea what it was that did for them. Not you, don’t give yourself airs. You were Kylin. And now you’re a Precipice. The Precipice. Defeated, you have no life, nor do the others. You all fled from Greenland. You couldn’t measure up to your status, like me, like all of us. I sit here, I’m ashamed and mourn the Giants. And you too cast your eyes down.”

“My folly, Ten Keir, has abated. I’m no weaker for that.”

“Your folly. There’s a trembling in you. You lot are sinking, I don’t know why. Only Delvil remained strong. You know it. Else why would you come here. I curse myself and beat myself up for seeing it only now. So that I may lash about me, I have anchored myself to these ruins. And feast on the view they’ve bequeathed me. That’s what they were, the Giants. They rampaged, they were horrible, they snorted vengeance. But they were rightfully above you and me. In all their rampaging they were in the right, over me and over you, Hoyet Sala. You lot are pitiful, ridiculous. Unworthy of the things humanity has made. All ruined. Go ahead, crow.”

“Ten Keir, why do you torment me. Oh how you torment me. What brought down the Giants? They were driven to annihilate themselves.”

“That doesn’t absolve you, or me. They didn’t want to annihilate themselves, I assure you. Some error, some mistake, a weakness must have laid them low in Cornwall. They overreached. I assure you of this: look at me, admit it. You belonged to us, yes, and to them. Remember what you did, Kylin, think of yourself. I regret I didn’t stay friends with Delvil but let him die. We both regret it. You too. Help what can still be helped. No man ever died more despairing than I, if I must now die, seeing no salvation. Think, Kylin, what we had in our hands. No one measured up to it. Just because it fell into the hands of thieves, hands that abused it, doesn’t make it less astounding, less great, less ours. The Giants had the web; they employed it in vengeful fury. They built upon themselves. I was afraid, but now I see it was the proudest most human thing that’s ever happened. Gone now, trampled into the ground. But maybe, Kylin, maybe it’s not too late. They couldn’t master it, it came too fast, no learning comes for free. Ah, Kylin, we sent you to Greenland to make a new continent. Meki was a new continent: we made it. And you. Now you weep.”

“Not for the Giants. Come down from the rubble.”

“I don’t want to see your people. I sit here because I am ashamed of them.”

“Come down, Ten Keir. You’re no coward. Stop crawling over broken concrete, twisted steel, stop going hungry in all this cement dust. Are you still Ten Keir? I’d better give you a name: you are Taushan-dagh, the Hill of the Hare.”

“I shall die.”

“You think contact with me will kill you? Come.”

The withered little body clambered swaying in the sunlight down among trickling clattering stones. “Here I am.”

“Stay with me.”

“Come, Kylin, let me lead you.” They walked for a day, a second, a third northward, through scrub and settlements. Ten Keir whimpered at night, wept for the Giants. He never looked around him as they walked. A great grey-green water came: the North Sea. “Here we part. There is no salvation. Not even for you. I wanted to come here. Goodbye, Kylin.”

Hoyet Sala stood silent, head bowed, as the stumbling man went from him, trudging through windswept sand. He stood before the crashing breakers. Stood. Stood. Suddenly Ten Keir fell onto the sand, lay on his side. After some time the other touched his shoulder, breathed: “You. Ten Keir.”

“Don’t touch me. Go away.”

Hoyet Sala dragged his heavy feet over dunes until the other man was out of sight. An hour later he trudged back to the slowly heaving sea, now violet and black-blue. Ten Keir was lying in the sand, a little black heap. Hoyet Sala squatted silently beside him. After a while the little man lifted his head, sat up, put hands to his face, said nothing. “You called me a coward, Hoyet Sala. I’m pitiful. I can’t go in. It was this water that devoured them. This is what devoured the Giants.”

“Come away, Ten Keir. You insisted on coming. I sympathise. Give me your blessing too. Don’t stay too long.”

Whimpering, often collapsing, fists often pressed to his eyes, mostly slouching, the emaciated hollow-eyed little man followed bearded Hoyet Sala. They meandered back through a region of northern settlers. In a wood that was being cleared there lay fir trunks, stripped of branches and bark. They sat side by side. Hoyet Sala’s face was turned to the ground, clouded, closed. Late in the afternoon he called to settlers nearby; they knew him. They were to pile stones in the clearing. He helped to carry heavy boulders, some white some dark. Ten Keir looked on a while. When their eyes met, Hoyet Sala nodded: “Yes. Come and help.” And the ragged man felt moved to stand, pull stones from the ground, roll them. And he realised what they were doing: erecting a symbol of the Giants. Towards evening the high wide pile was finished. The settlers left. For two days Hoyet Sala and Ten Keir camped in the clearing. Then the bearded man took the

other by the hand: “Let’s go on, Ten Keir.”

They headed for Brussels. Before the wasteland of rubble the Iceland expeditionary placed a hand on the other’s shoulder: “This is Brussels, Ten Keir.” The other gripped his hand. “Not Ten Keir. Taushan-Dagh you said. Don’t leave me alone. Let’s walk around the city.” They embraced.

Gentle shining-eyed Diuva rode in an open oxcart that winter through a landscape of snow flurries, looking for Hoyet Sala in the Paris region. Wanted to thank him for preserving the southern settlements; she also pined for Venaska, driven away by him at Lyon. But the buxom woman with the full head of red hair could not be angry with him. Hoyet Sala walked at her side across snowy fields. He stood by children, laughed with them, snapped dry branches, gazed dreamily at crows, lifted his arms in play as if he meant to fly away with them. In his little hut he often sang hymns in the morning, like the British settlers. Once he took Diuva’s cold hands in his as they walked: what did she hold against him – that he set little store by grieving? that he tormented no one, sent no one to the fire? “I’ve not forgotten grief. The Giants are in our thoughts. Stone monuments have been erected everywhere to remember them. Celebrate them. They were mighty humans. And we have fire. Nothing has slipped away from us. We hold on to it all. Diuva, the land accepts us, but we are something in the land. It does not ensnare us. We have no fear of air or ground. You know Ten Keir? He’s calmed down. He knows we have power, true knowledge, and humility. He’s my friend. He took our symbol and swore not to abandon me. Why? He sees how we have grown strong and prosperous. We are the true Giants. It is we who came through the Urals War and Greenland. And we, we are not defeated, Diuva. You can tell them what I said, on the Garonne and along the Rhone. Soon we shall be known all across the Earth.”

He lowered his gaze, sat on a boulder, pulled his lambskin around him. He praised Venaska; she was gone yet not gone. Passing through those thickets by the Seine he knew where she had headed. Everything would be preserved. Hoyet Sala’s hand reached into the clear icy air: it seemed the great primal Power they worshipped had swept the Giants away in Cornwall, making use of Venaska. For it is no dead Power, but a luxuriant conscious profound Being. Diuva, gentle female, brushed loose hair back from her forehead. She looked at the bearded man, how he sat there so upright, so serious, stared so earnestly at her; she smiled. She was heartened: there was something of Venaska in him.

On the wide newly opened farmlands heavy with crops, from the Belgian seacoast across the Seine to the Loire, Hoyet Sala bestowed the name Venaska.

Blooming fading human beings of flesh and blood dwelled in the rumpled southern lands of Europe, on western ground with its massifs, young lowlands, on the Russian tableland’s level black blanket. The Earth shifted mountains highlands depressions under and around them. Great rivers drained clear water, filled lake basins. Brown and green plant-beings sprang from the soil. Forests and thickets grew along the Danube, along the Dnepr and the Don. Dense forest and swamp from the Atlantic coast to southern shores. Wildflowers grasses, birds cooing sobbing dying in them. Animals crawled swam with bodies naked scaled furred over the levels, forever grasping swallowing emptying. Until ground, water eager for transformations, gnawing air had them all again. Hordes of humans in peace and death, wooing and bride-winning through volcanic eruptions and floods. Holding fast to one another, fading away with tears, generation after generation, mother and child mother and child, lover and his beloved. And always the gases of the air yearning for the lung, the tiny cells, the nuclei, the soft protoplasm, forever inhaled and breathed out again. And when the heart stilled, cells separated and dissolved, they were new souls, decomposed Protein Ammonia Amino acids Carbon dioxide Water, water transformed to vapour. Greedy for sorrows and pleasures, always inclined to wander, soul-unions in snowy landscapes, on the vast heaving sea, in the roaring storm, stone-folk lifting the ground to make mountains.

Black the ether overhead, with its little balls of sun, sparkling heaps of sintering stars. Breast to breast the blackness lay with these humans; from them light gleamed.

THE END